



THORNS OF OMERTÀ SERIES

THORNS OF DESIRE

EVA WINNERS

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THORNS OF OMERTÀ SERIES

Each book in the Thorns of Omertà series can be read as a standalone with the exception of Thorns of Lust and Thorns of Love, which is the story of Tatiana Nikolaev.

Thorns of Desire is a complete standalone. However, since this story takes part during the timeline of the previous books in the series, it might spoil some events.

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THORNS OF DESIRE PLAYLIST

<https://spoti.fi/3L9nwHX>

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AUTHOR NOTE

Hello readers,

Please note that this book has some dark elements and disturbing scenes to it. Please proceed with caution. It is not for the faint of heart.

Don't forget to sign up to Eva Winners's Newsletter (www.evawinners.com) for news about future releases.

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*To all the ladies who secretly hope to be railed by a hot Italian daddy
who'll call them a good girl.*

Turn the page.

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BLURB

A devil in a Brioni suit.
My unforgettable one-night stand.
And a notorious member of the Omertà empire.

I learned that last piece of information a bit too late.

I never expected to see him again. But it turns out that destiny had other plans and gave me the whole of him for several incredible hours.

Then I bolted again—for the second time in my life.

He was Manuel Marchetti.
Off-limits. Forbidden. Dangerous.

So then why was I unable to forget him?

My body and soul came alive only for him. I hoped I'd never see him again, but it wasn't meant to be. Everywhere I went, the man was there—stealing kisses, making promises, and painting streets red.

He seemed to delight in pushing my buttons and demanding *more*. Much to my dismay, it seemed I was unable to resist him.

Then, a chance encounter required his protection. He swept me away to his remote Italian castle and I could feel my resolve cracking under his burning gaze and searing touch.

The harder I tried to resist, the faster my body caved.

With each passing day, I was starting to realize that by the end of it all, I'd be the one succumbing.

Either by the secrets surrounding my life or under his consuming touch.

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PROLOGUE

ATHENA



Twelve Years Old

I opened my mouth and screamed. I didn't stop until my lungs burned. Until my voice cracked and my ears rang.

My raw screams must have angered the gods because a flash of lightning cracked across the sky—furious and blinding—and the earth shook. The breeze swept through, barely touching my heated skin, the glimpses of the sky and bending branches still in my sight.

Shoved into a casket, the splintered wood pressed into my palms, digging beneath my nails, but the pain didn't compare to the suffocating terror. I thrashed back and forth, my head swiveling left and right, every fiber of me desperate to escape this nightmare.

Except nobody was coming.

Gasping and panting, I attempted to pull myself upright but failed miserably. A chuckle sounded, ominous and dark, and I whipped my head to find three faces staring down at me with revulsion.

There were no more masks, but it didn't matter. I recognized their voices. These were the same men who'd come into our apartment a mere week ago, threatening Mom.

Why didn't we run away? Why didn't we hide?

"Wh-where is my mother?" I said through clattering teeth.

One of them crouched down and gripped my chin.

“You better worry about yourself, girl. Welcome to your grave,” he said, his smile twisted and his eyes glittering with malice.

“Why?” I rasped, shuddering in the small box. “I want my mother.”

The blow that followed had my head flying to the side, my ears ringing as pain ripped through my cheek. I reached my bound wrists up, smearing the sticky, hot liquid that dripped down my face—blood and tears.

He clasped my chin between rough fingers again and spoke with malevolence. “Did my sister get to call for her mother before she was burned alive?” I blinked, my heart thundering painfully. I didn’t understand the words he spat at me. I didn’t know his sister. “Sister for a daughter. You will burn in this casket.”

He grabbed my hair, twisting it around his fist, and soon another punch followed. My head smacked against the wood, the air rushing out of me as I gasped. *Breathe. Breathe. I can’t breathe.*

I dug my jagged fingernails into his wrist. I fought, but it was all for naught. I was weak and in more pain than I ever thought possible.

My screams turned to cries before finally dissolving into raspy, pathetic breaths. But my body wasn’t ready to give in. I tried to crawl out of the box. I needed to live. I needed my mother. I needed—

I didn’t know. I just knew I couldn’t die like this. Hopelessly, I choked for air, sobbing for my mother. For anyone who was willing to save me.

But nobody came.

A man yanked me by my hair, forcing me down into the box. I pushed and twisted, fighting with all I had. A third man came around and held me down before the wood top slowly started to shut.

I stared helplessly, watching the slivers of gray sky disappear. I focused on its beauty, sent a prayer up above. To whom, I didn’t know, but I hoped someone would hear it.

I inhaled a deep breath, the salt in the air soothing the pain in my soul as the waves lulled me toward my final resting place.

I let the cold, dark reality sink in. This was the end. It wasn’t fair, but nobody had asked me. It was the reality of life.

So I closed my eyes and started humming to fill the eerily quiet and darkness. Anything to drive fear from my mind. And I didn’t stop. Not when the anguish licked at my skin. Not when the fire ignited.

I would hum until death came for me.

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ONE

MANUEL



Eleven Years Later

Lampposts lit up the streets of Paris, casting a romantic glow as I made my way to the Marchetti venue where Reina Romero's fashion show was due to start. Though Enrico was technically my nephew, he was only five years younger than me—the son of my older brother. Enrico and I, along with his brother, were raised as cousins since we were all close in age, but we were all raised in the world of the Omertà, where the only vow that counted was the one given to the mafia.

Over the last few decades, the organization in Italy had changed and adapted, allowing it to flourish. The five ruling families—Marchetti, DiMauro, Agosti, Romero, and Leone—had developed a finely honed sense of loyalty among their citizens, but we'd also made powerful alliances with the Irish, Russians, Brazilians, and Greeks. And through Kingston—the infamous Ghost—even with the Ashfords. Together we ran one of the most successful criminal organizations in the world, the Thorns of Omertà.

We had plenty of people who opposed us, and they never hesitated to strike from the shadows.

Like now.

I sensed the presence behind me and came to a stop in front of the window shop. I casually flicked a glance at the display, my eyes locking on the reflection behind me.

I turned slowly and met the fucker head-on, but before I could utter a single word, my stalker took off running.

The ignorant man would need to be taught that nobody ever escaped me. I trained too hard, kept my body in too strong a physical state to let myself be a target. And if they happened to outrun me... well, I always found them.

I started running, grateful for the loaded gun in my holster but pissed off about my custom suit and shoes. If we weren't in the middle of the city, I'd shoot the motherfucker and get on with my night.

My loafers pounded against the pavement as I closed in on him, stretching my arm out and grabbing him by his collar. I spotted an alley and yanked him into it. He fell onto his knees, and before he could stand up, I propped my foot on his shoulder like my own personal footstool.

"No use running," I said, my voice sharp. My eyes fell to the tattoo on his hand, a Chinese symbol in the mouth of a skull. "There's nowhere to run."

He lifted his hands in surrender. "Mercy."

He knew better. There was no mercy in this world.

"Why are you following me?" I asked instead.

"I'm n-not," he stuttered, his accent thick.

I sighed. "Who are you following, then?" The full moon over us glimmered as I waited for his answer. I pulled out my gun and shoved the barrel against his skull. "Who?"

"Atticus," he choked out. "He's in Paris."

My brows furrowed. Atticus Popov was an enigma, causing trouble everywhere he went and disappearing before you could get your hands on him. His son, Danil Popov, had expanded on what Atticus started and turned it into one of the most successful organizations in the Balkans, possibly beyond too. But this was not Balkan territory.

"Why is he in Paris?" I demanded, pressing my foot harder against his body.

"Attending a fashion event at Marchetti's venue."

I scoffed. "Why would he be at the Marchetti venue?"

"I don't know, man. I'm just following orders."

"What are your orders exactly?" He hesitated, and I pushed the barrel of the gun farther into him. "I hate repeating myself."

“To find Atticus and an old mistress of his. There’s a price on their heads. That’s all I know.”

Atticus really fucked up when he went against Lykos Costello, the head of the Greek mafia. Some of us were old-school, which meant no flesh for sale. If a woman took it upon herself to enter the sex trade—*consensually*—that was her own business. But Atticus, being young and ambitious, thought he knew better and teamed up with the Albanians, the Triads—the Chinese mafia—and the Tijuana cartel to move flesh over the Greek territory.

His first mistake.

No move was made on Greek territory without the Costellos’ permission, and there was hell to pay if you got caught. Especially if the business transaction could start a war.

But Atticus thought himself smarter. Then, to make matters worse, he turned around and began selling the flesh to the Cortes cartel, fucking over the Albanians, the Tijuana cartel, and the Triads, making himself and anyone connected to him, forever a target. As the years went on, organizations forgave and forgot, but the Triads never did.

Until roughly eleven years ago.

The word on the street was that the score was settled—we all knew better than to ask questions.

“Are the Triads after Atticus Popov again?” He didn’t have to answer, it was written all over his face. “I thought the score was settled.”

“We thought the same, but we were wrong.”

“Meaning?”

His lips pressed into a thin line, and I knew he wouldn’t divulge anything else.

“Well, hunting on territory that doesn’t belong to you or Atticus is punishable by death,” I remarked.

“Please, I have a family, a kid—”

I pulled the trigger before he could finish the sentence and watched as his body hit the pavement with a loud thud.



By the time I went back home to shower and put on a fresh suit, the fashion show at the Marchetti venue was finished. Instead of returning home, for

some unfathomable reason to me, Enrico went to a goddamned nightclub.

Music pumped, obnoxious and loud, giving me a headache even standing outside the club, and I seriously debated leaving Enrico to his own devices. I was too old for this shit. We were Italians, used to loud people and big families, but not even that came close to the sound of the bass assaulting my ears right now.

“What the fuck was Enrico thinking coming to a club like this?” I muttered under my breath. Just as I braced my senses for further insult, I spotted him exiting the club with a redhead on his arm, and understanding dawned on me. My nephew was about to get laid. The corner of my lips lifted. “Thank fuck.”

I really wasn’t in the mood for crowded places and loud people, especially after a run-in with the Triads man who had put Atticus Popov and the Marchetti name in the same sentence. What in the fuck made them believe that Atticus would be attending the Marchetti venue? We didn’t do business with the Popov family.

Enrico ushered the girl into the car, his driver taking them away, and I decided to take a detour. With my nephew—who was currently speeding down the Parisian street toward his home—being the sole reason I was here in the first place, the expectation to stay and suffer vanished. *Free to go.* I was just about to turn around when a young woman caught my eye. She was short and curvy with long, wavy auburn hair, fair skin, and green, cat-like eyes. Her nose was small and straight and her mouth lush and pink. Even in the cloak of the night, I envisioned how perfectly they would look wrapped around my dick.

I’d been with countless women in my forty-five years on this earth—actresses, models, even an opera singer—but none had ever made me pause. Yes, they piqued my interest and made my dick hard, but my heart never blipped at the sight of any of them. Until fucking now. At the risk of sounding like a complete puss, my heart beat triple time over this woman. For a moment, I’d completely forgotten where I was, the entire world giving way to the gorgeous woman swaying her hips to the music.

Just as I was about to turn around, a melodious burst of laughter traveled over the din of the club, captivating me. She was bent at the waist, chuckling so hard that her whole body shook. It was contagious, and I found my mouth twitching, smiling right along with her. Then my heart skipped. *Again.*

I frowned. Fuck, this wasn't normal. Maybe I needed a checkup. This had to be the first sign of a heart attack.

Her friends sauntered down the street but she fell behind, her attention on the phone in her hand. Her brow furrowed and she started typing, unaware her friends were getting swallowed by the crowd.

It took no time for the vultures to descend, surrounding her like she was their next meal. Something about her seemed to trigger a protective instinct in me and I wedged my way through the group of men.

"Touch me, motherfucker, and I swear to God, I'll have your hands sawed off."

I stopped mid-step and an incredulous breath left me. She was pure fire.

I let my eyes drift down the slope of her back, circling her trim waist and dipping to her full hips. It was then that one of the assholes put his hand on her shoulder, and in one swift move, I shoved him away from her.

"You don't fucking touch her," I roared, surprised at my own reaction. I took a step forward, straightened my shoulders, and looked down my nose at him. "And you better run from *this* woman or I'll ensure that the saw she just mentioned is nice and sharp." I'd enjoy nothing more to be quite honest. "Now, apologize and get the hell out of here."

The men dispersed faster than a speeding bullet, running with their tails between their legs.

"None of them apologized." A pouty voice pulled my attention back to the woman whose eyes were now shining with mischief.

"We can always go after them, *bella*," I offered, watching her like I'd never watched a woman before. "You'd like that, *sì*?"

Her full pink lips curved up and... I actually clutched my chest this time. What the fuck? I stared at her, trying to figure out what the hell was going on.

"It's tempting, but I can think of better ways to spend the night," she said, her voice playful. She had a pleasant voice and a blinding smile. Radiant and mesmerizing. And her eyes... I had never been so captivated by a woman's eyes, pulling me into her web, their long lashes batting up at me and filling me with sinful ideas.

She must've taken my silence for rejection because her face fell.

"Well, thanks for jumping in like a gentleman," she said. "I'd offer to buy you a drink, but you don't seem—"

“That won’t be necessary.” Her eyebrow arched in surprise and the corner of my mouth lifted in a smirk. “After all, a gentleman always pays.”

She let out a soft chuckle, her gaze burning through me. Something told me forgetting this mesmerizing woman with the auburn hair would be impossible.

“Yeah... I don’t think you’re a gentleman.”

“Beautiful *and* smart,” I remarked. “A deadly combination.”

She threw her head back and laughed.

“I guess you’ll find out.” She stood there, staring up at me, cheeks flushed. “One drink,” she breathed.

I nodded. “Just one.”

Famous last words.

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TWO ATHENA



Trying not to overthink it, I let him lead me back into the dim nightclub, the distinct aroma of beer and whiskey all around us. Once my vision adjusted, we made a beeline toward the corner of a long wooden bar rather than the dance floor.

“What would you like to drink?” he asked as he helped me onto a vacant high-backed stool and took the one nearest to me as he flagged the bartender.

“Freak shot,” I answered confidently. I’d need all the courage I could get.

His brows twitched upward, but he didn’t question it. “You heard the lady. And whiskey on the rocks for me.”

It took no time for our drinks to appear, and like a gentleman, he placed it in front of me.

“Shall we toast to something?”

I smiled. “To filthy sex?”

He bit back a grin and raised his glass before clinking mine. “Sex is only dirty if it’s done right. *Salute.*”

And we downed our drinks.

I had found the definition of tall, dark, and handsome in the form of an Italian daddy.

A single look from him stole the breath from my lungs. The smattering of silver at his temples gave me a rough idea of his age, which I only found more appealing. He had a strong, masculine jaw peppered with stubble,

olive skin, and dark eyes lined with the thickest black lashes I'd ever seen. I would enjoy running my fingers through his dark brown hair while he handled me with those expert hands. He stood next to me at well over six feet tall, his white dress shirt rolled up, exposing tanned forearms.

And his voice. It was the kind of grumbly, accented voice that would melt the panties off a virgin saint. Fortunately, I sure as hell wasn't one. My panties would be coming off in a more enjoyable way if I had my way.

I'd never seen a more beautiful specimen, and if he played his cards right, he'd have a front-and-center feature in my next book. Hell, I could take him on as my muse for the indefinite future.

The commotion in the nightclub was ongoing. The aroma of whiskey, bourbon, and leather with a hint of wood polish surrounded us as we watched each other under the low lights.

I'd lost my friends and my hair was sticking to the back of my neck with how humid it was in the club, but the only thing I could focus on was learning more about this hot Italian. His hand was wrapped around my waist, sheltering the tipsy crowds from bumping into me, and something about it cocooned me into our own world as if I were alone with this man.

When my eyes finally met his, he arched a brow, his lip twitching. "See something you like?"

I chuckled and arched a brow, but something about his brazen confidence struck me as refreshing. "Anyone with two functioning eyeballs would," I murmured, sweeping my gaze over him appreciatively. "Although clothes can hide deficiencies, and that Brioni suit could make even Homer Simpson sexy."

He chuckled as he reached for his tie, his fingers lingering on it. "I don't know who Homer is, but I'd be more than happy to put that theory to the test."

His movements were so smooth, so practiced—it went beyond our obvious age gap. No, this man was *experienced*. Irrational jealousy shot through me at the thought of another woman seeing what was underneath those clothes. I immediately squashed it. Jealousy was my mother's style, not mine.

"Homer is..." I shook my head. Did they even play *The Simpsons* in Italy? "Never mind. And no need to take off your clothes," I stated breezily. There was no mistaking his hotness, but I wasn't about to come right out

and say it. “However, first things first, let’s get some basics.” His eyebrows shot up. “Married?”

“No.”

My eyes instinctively fell to his hand, pleased to find it ringless and also devoid of any suspicious tan lines or indentations. “Girlfriend?”

“No.”

“Gay?”

He threw his head back and his baritone laugh filled the small space between us.

“I wouldn’t be standing with the most beautiful woman on the continent if I was.”

Relief washed over me as my gaze flicked to the mirror behind the bar, catching my reflection. My cheeks were flushed and my eyes glimmering like diamonds. I wore my favorite sophisticated but sexy, white Dolce and Gabbana bustier minidress that showed off my curves the way I liked. Paired with my Louboutin pumps that always gave my legs extra length... Yeah, I knew I looked good.

“You’re not too shabby yourself,” I retorted, already wishing I could see more of him. It might be October, but the heat radiating from beneath his tailored three-piece suit was enough to set me on fire.

I turned to face him, his smoldering bedroom eyes pulling me into their depths. He smelled damn good, too.

“Do you have a name? Or should I call you Mr. Hot Daddy? Because another five minutes and it’ll stick forever.”

His dark chuckle followed and he extended his hand. When I put mine into his, he lifted it to his lips, turned it over, and brushed a light kiss over my knuckles. It sent a tingle racing through me.

“I’m Manuel.”

“Manuel,” I repeated, staring at his lips, mesmerized by his smooth, deep voice.

“Now it’s only fair I get your name.”

“Athena.”

Surprise flashed across his face. “Goddess of wisdom, craft, and warfare.”

I pursed my lips. “I’d rather be Aphrodite, but nobody asked me.”

“She’s overrated.” He shrugged, and his eyes raked down my body. “Although, you’re certainly as tempting as Aphrodite.”

I knew Italians were renowned for their passion and charm, but this man took it a step further. The air crackled between us, tension weaving its invisible thread between us and pulling taut.

I licked my lips, my hands shaking with the sudden desire to touch him. But I didn't move, resisting the spell. His body was coiled tight, jaw flexing and hands in fists at his sides, almost like he was fighting the same intense need to touch me.

I let my gaze travel the length of him and... *holy fucking shit*. There was an unmistakable bulge in his slacks.

My toes curled and my pussy throbbed as I teetered on the edge of what I wanted to do—jump his bones right now—and what I should do, which was get to know him.

Fuck that. I know him well enough.

"You're packing," I blurted.

A slow, sexy smile spread across his face. "I am, yes."

His dark eyes heated, and for once, I decided not to be cautious. For so long, I'd weighed my decisions and made sure to pick men who were safe and careful—*boring*—but all that left me with was disappointment.

It was probably the reason behind my current writer's block. My inspiration of late was boring as hell. So, I was determined. I'd take my chances on the wild side, starting with this Italian.

He would be anything but a letdown, I was certain of it. From the way he carried himself, there wasn't any doubt that he knew exactly what to do between the sheets.

I bit my bottom lip as all kinds of sensual images flashed through my mind. "Do you do this often?"

His brow arched. "Do what?"

"Pick up random girls at bars," I deadpanned.

He threw his head back and laughed again. "I don't pick up girls."

"But you pick up women?"

His eyes gleamed. "You're the first."

I smiled. "I like you."

He smiled wickedly and seemed to consider his next words. He leaned closer to me, his breath ghosting the shell of my ear. "That's good, because I'm going to make you mine. I'm going to bury my face in your pussy tonight and make you come all over my tongue. And when you're screaming my name, you'll be begging me for my cock."

My cheeks bloomed with heat. Apparently Italians didn't waste any time.

"Begging, huh?"

He grasped a tendril of my hair, curling the lock around his finger before tucking it behind my ear. "What do you say, *amorina*?"

Oh, God.

Was it normal for my body to react this way? It was a novelty, something I wanted to explore.

"*Amorina*?" I rasped, my voice trembling. "My name is Athena."

His knuckles brushed against my cheek, then he traced one finger down the line of my neck, stopping at my racing pulse, before he whispered, "It's a nickname. It fits you perfectly."

Goose bumps scattered over my skin and slick arousal drenched my panties. My mouth was dry and my heart drummed against my ribs. I needed this. Needed *him*, and nothing would stand in my way.

Just as I opened my mouth to suggest we find the exit immediately, my phone buzzed and I let out a frustrated groan as I glanced down to check who it was.

Reina: Where the fuck are you all?

I loved my friends, every single one of them. But tonight, the only plans I had included this gorgeous man and everything I knew he could offer me.

I typed a quick reply in our group chat. They would know what it meant.



Manuel leaned back as if to give me privacy. "Emergency?"

His gaze roved over me while he watched me from beneath those gorgeous, darkly lashed brown eyes.

"No emergency."

Another message came through, but this time I didn't bother opening it. I had more important things to do—such as sitting on this gorgeous Italian's face.

I gripped my newly refilled shot glass off the bar, downed it in one go, then slipped off my stool.

"Should we get going or do you want to stand around and talk all night?"

A hint of a smile curled his lips and he put his hand on my lower back, guiding me toward the exit.

“You waste no time, no?”

I flashed him a confident smile. “Not tonight.”

It wouldn’t be until the next day that I’d realize I never pressed the send button, leaving my friends’ messages unanswered.

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THREE MANUEL



Athena.
The name suited her perfectly—a goddess of wisdom and beauty. I had yet to learn her last name, but I would.

I liked her spirit. A lot.

My driver, who I messaged while we were in the bar, was waiting for us outside.

Athena faltered at my side, and I pulled my hand away from her back, not wanting to make assumptions. Disappointment hit me hard, because I hadn't stopped thinking about peeling that dress off from the moment I saw her.

"Changed your mind?"

She took a deep breath before facing me.

"I haven't, but..." She jutted her chin in the direction of my waiting car. "Car sex isn't a problem, but the streets are still busy, so I think we'll have a hard time finding somewhere private. Besides, your driver might get horny, and I'm really not into threesomes or voyeurism."

I couldn't help but chuckle. I'd had my share of women, but none of them had ever managed to throw me so off-kilter. I needed her like nothing else.

"Don't worry," I said, my voice low and firm. "This isn't a high school prom, and I'm definitely not taking you in the back seat of a car." I ushered her forward where my driver stood holding the door open. She slid into the

back, looking up at me as I followed her in. “Thank you, Giuseppe. Take us to La Réserve.”

As Giuseppe pulled the car into traffic, my gaze lingered on Athena. So many images tumbled through my mind—spread out over my sheets as I ate her out, her face buried in the pillow as I took her from behind, holding a fist in her hair while she screamed in pleasure.

Her green eyes darted to me, cheeks flushed, and she licked her lips. Just like that, my dick twitched.

“La Réserve as in the hotel?”

I nodded. “Unless you’d rather we pick a different place.”

She took her bottom lip between her lips. “Well, I think they’re pretty exclusive. They might not...” She trailed off, her brow wrinkling. “I don’t think they accommodate hookups.” Her eyes glinted with a mixture of mischief and lust as she focused on my lips. “And I really, really need to get laid tonight.”

I wiped a hand over my mouth and grinned. Her honesty was refreshing.

“Considering it’s mine, I’m sure they’ll find a way to make an exception.” I brushed her hair off her shoulders. “Don’t worry, *amorina*. I’ll be buried so deep inside your clenched pussy, you’re going to come harder than you ever have, all over my cock.” I brushed my knuckles over her burning cheeks. “You’ll get, as you Americans like to say, *laid*.”

She squirmed on the leather seat, squeezing her thighs together, and I officially went from half-hard to fully erect.

The car came to a stop and the door opened. I climbed out and extended my hand to help her. She took it, smoothing her dress with her free hand, then flicked me a glance, giving me a smile that made my blood heat.

“Good. I love a sure thing.”

Cristo.

I loved her sass, but I would love filling her mouth even more.

I guided her toward the hotel entrance, trying to see it through Athena’s eyes and hoping it met her expectations. The hotel building with a Baroque-style façade adorned with sculptures and balustrades was the attraction for many visitors, but few could afford it.

Her heels clicked against the marble lobby, and I sensed discreet glances thrown our way. I guided her to the elevator, swiped my key card, and pressed the button for the top floor.

Her brow arched. “Penthouse suite?”

My lips curved up. "Only the best for you."

"Would this be a good time to ask you what you do?"

There was no way I'd tell her about my dealings with the mafia, so I settled for something a little more vague. "This and that. You?"

She laughed. "This and that also, but apparently I'm not doing it as well as you."

The elevator dinged and the doors slid open as we reached the top floor. I stood back, letting her walk through first, and watched as her eyes widened. It was an everyday sight for me, but even I couldn't deny the beauty of this centuries-old establishment. High ceilings, a crystal chandelier hanging over the private dining room table, marble floors and plush leather armchairs facing a crackling fireplace. It was all state of the art, restored with painstaking attention to detail by some of the country's most famed architects and interior designers.

But nothing came close to the unobstructed view of the Paris skyline, the Seine River snaking beneath the Pont Alexandre III and giving way to some of the city's best boulangeries and department stores.

Until tonight.

The woman standing before the window, her fingers resting against the glass as she looked over the city spread out beneath her, rivaled the seventeen-thousand-dollar-per-night view from my hotel's top suite, no questions asked.

"Would you like something to drink?" I offered. After all, I didn't want to be the heathen intent on rutting into her beyond all else, even though it was the only thing on my mind at the moment.

Her eyes darted to me for a moment, and she said, "No, I'm good, thanks," before glancing back at the city's twinkling lights.

I studied her petite frame with that narrow waist and beautiful curvy hips while visions of her bent over the back of the couch and our sweat-slicked bodies moving together played in my mind.

I loosened my tie, thumbing the silky material as I imagined wrapping it around her wrists, holding them above her head, and thrusting into her tight heat. But I had to deliver on my promise first.

I came to stand behind her, my painfully hard cock brushing against her round ass. She inhaled sharply, then looked over her shoulder at me. She didn't turn around, just waited, and it was such a fucking turn-on.

I pulled the zipper of her dress down, the sound, mixed with her soft breaths, sending a seductive echo through the room. It dropped silently to the floor while my attention zeroed in on an angry scar on her left shoulder blade.

I traced my finger over it lightly, careful not to hurt her, the texture rough. She stiffened but didn't move away.

"What's this?" I asked her.

She glanced over her shoulder. "A burn mark."

Bending my head down, I pressed a kiss against it. "How did it happen?"

Inhaling deeply, she slowly released her breath. "Fire," she muttered. "I'm not fond of them." Then she turned her face away from me. "Now, are we going to talk or get busy?"

I let out a sardonic breath. "Which would you prefer?"

Her answer was demonstrative. Her lacy bra and panties joined her dress on the floor, leaving her in nothing but her strappy heels.

With one hand, I tilted her head to the side and brushed my lips against the soft skin of her neck, tracing my tongue over her fluttering pulse. I couldn't help but bite gently, needing to mark her somehow, the impulse foreign.

"Turn around," I ordered, my voice gravelly.

As she faced me, my eyes were immediately drawn to her full breasts as they rose and fell, her pink nipples forming hard little points and begging me for attention.

I reached up and cupped one full breast in the palm of my hand, bending my head to take the tight peak into my mouth. She arched her back, her head falling against the window and her hands coming up to clutch my hair. I swirled my tongue around her nipple and was rewarded with a moan.

I moved my attention to her other breast, nipping and biting at her tender tip and then easing the sting with a light brush of my tongue.

"Manuel," she gasped as I grazed my teeth against it. "I need... more."

I straightened, releasing her nipple with a soft pop, and met her half-lidded gaze. She stood there naked, the night sky as her backdrop, snaking her hand down her stomach, down between her thighs, and brushing her fingers against her slick entrance.

Fuck, she was perfect.

The fact she didn't feign shyness was so incredibly sexy, I couldn't resist unzipping my pants to pull out my aching shaft. Athena's eyes widened, fixating on my cock.

"Fuck, you're big," she breathed, working herself faster. I wrapped my fingers around it and started to pump myself. "Are you going to fuck me?"

Dio, she was gorgeous.

I tightened my grip on my cock at the clear invitation in her voice. "No, *amorina*. First I'm going to eat your dripping wet pussy."

I released my shaft and gripped her wrist, stopping her frantic movements as she worked her clit.

"No," she whimpered, arousal trickling down her inner thighs and perfuming the air. Fuck, she smelled like honeydew in the spring. She squirmed, her fingers reaching for her clit, then letting out a pouty protest. "Manuel, I'm so close."

I reached down with one hand, running it up her thigh, then watched her face as I brushed my fingers over her wet folds. Her lips parted and her eyes went glassy as my thumb pressed against her damp, swollen spot. Her hips bucked and a whispered moan dropped from her lips.

"You'll come with my mouth on your pussy," I growled, my lips traveling down until they hovered just over hers before licking her bottom lip sensually. Pressing deeper, I slid my finger into her slick heat. My throat went dry. Eager to replace my fingers with my mouth, I murmured, "I'm going to fuck your cunt with my fingers and get you ready to take every inch of my cock."

I thrust my fingers deeper at the same time I brought the hand she used to pleasure herself to my mouth and sucked her fingers clean. Her hips began to move in rhythm with my fingers, sliding in and out. Her lips parted as she watched me, sneaking glances down to where our bodies were connected.

She moaned, and I nearly did too, our breaths the only noise filling the space between us. Her eyes were dilated, her cheeks flushed when she said, "More. Please."

Without further ado, I dropped to my knees and hooked one of her legs over my shoulder. Lust drummed a heavy beat in my blood and my hard dick strained, but this was about her pleasure. I buried my face in her glistening pussy, running my tongue from her entrance to her clit in one

long swipe. A satisfied groan pushed past my mouth, her taste sending my eyes rolling to the back of my head.

She was fucking delicious—like a fine Italian wine. I alternated sucking and flicking her clit, then slid a finger back inside her. Her head fell back against the window with a soft thump, her pants and moans getting louder.

I grazed her clit with my teeth, then looked up at her. “The whole city’s watching us, my tongue in your pussy, *amorina*.”

Her hips rocked against my mouth, her fingers clutching my hair as if scared I’d pull away. The world could stop turning and I’d die a happy man with her pussy suffocating me. I thrust my tongue inside her entrance, groaning against her slick flesh as I savored the arousal seeping from her.

“Manuel!” she gasped, sucking in a sharp breath. Her hands clutched my hair as I continued licking and thrusting my tongue into her. Her hips ground against my mouth with desperation, and I rubbed my thumb against her swollen clit in a steady rhythm.

Her hands tightened in my hair, her pelvis jolted forward, grinding on my face, and she came with panting moans as her inner muscles spasmed around my fingers.

When she sagged, I swiped my tongue over her one last time, then stood. I brought each finger that was inside her to my mouth and licked them clean.

“Are you ready for the next round?” I managed to say. Her eyes fell to my achingly hard dick and her dainty little hand reached for it, palming it. I groaned at how good it felt. “Sì, *amorina*?”

She watched me through her hooded gaze, then nodded with an audible swallow.

“Walk to the bedroom,” I commanded, giving her a wolfish smile. “Straight back on the right.”

To her credit, she obeyed. With her back to me, I discarded my gun holster and shoved it into the drawer-safe that opened and locked with my fingerprint. Once I heard it click shut, I followed close behind, admiring her beautiful round ass. I slowly unbuttoned my shirt, then kicked off my shoes and stripped off my socks.

Her heels clicking against the hardwood, she reached the bed and looked over her shoulder at me just as my pants came down, leaving me in black boxers.

“Fuck,” she muttered, her look of appreciation making me want to pound my chest. “You’re hot.”

“Get on the bed, crawl up to the top, then sit with your back against the headboard.”

She did as I said, then leaned back against the mahogany headboard and parted her thighs in invitation, the need in her eyes reflecting my own.

I looked at her slick, pink flesh, and the urge to crawl between her thighs and fuck my way into her heat seared through me. But I promised her one more orgasm. I closed my eyes, drawing on every thread of self-control, and when I opened them, I found her playing with her pussy with a naughty grin curving her lips.

“I’d rather have your dick inside me,” she breathed.

Watching her play with herself, I discarded my boxers. The bed dipped under my weight as I climbed onto it and made my way between her spread legs.

“You’re going to have to wait a bit longer,” I said, and lightly smacked her wrist away. “Now hands off. Your pussy’s mine.”

My dick leaked pre-cum, and I smeared it against her inner thighs as I pushed over her, savoring the scent of her arousal, knowing she was ready for me. I wrapped my fingers around my shaft, and slowly brushed the tip of it against her hot entrance.

Her back arched off the bed, the tip of my dick sliding inside her. “Oh my God...”

I gritted my teeth, my muscles twitching, but I pulled away, wanting her desperate for my cock. It was her next move that surprised me.

With all the grace in the world, she slid out from underneath me and reversed our positions. My hands came to grip her hips as she straddled me, her slick pussy coating my thigh.

“Athena, this wasn’t the deal,” I grunted.

She smiled, her cheeks flushed and her hair tousled, looking like a goddess of seduction herself, and I knew.

I knew—fucking knew. One night would never be enough.

FOUR

ATHENA



“*A morina*,” he groaned, his accent thick, as I brushed my pussy against his hard cock.

His hands gripped my hips and he slid me down his body, my pussy grinding against his muscular thigh. A delightful friction causing goose bumps to scatter across my collarbone.

“Make yourself come riding my thigh.” I loved his gruff tone, and even more his thick accent. Somehow I knew it to be a sign that he was as aroused as I was. “Give me one more and I’ll reward you.”

My cheeks flushed with heat, and I swallowed thickly, turned on beyond belief.

Shivering a little, I propped myself against his abs, hitching myself above his left thigh. When I looked at him, I saw he was focused on my glistening pussy, dark desire dominating his beautiful face.

My heart rate surged, but so did my arousal, and I rocked my hips. Rubbing hard, grinding down against him. It was awkward, my movements jerky and unpracticed. I felt my skin prickle as I used him to get myself off, my sex growing impossibly slick.

My breathing labored, becoming frantic as I sensed how close I was. I whimpered and let my gaze flicker to Manuel.

“Touch yourself.” His tone was harsher, his muscles tense. I reached between us and flicked my finger over my drenched clit. I moaned. Loudly. But before I could circle it and make myself come, his thick fingers

wrapped around my wrist and he brought my hand up to his mouth, taking my finger between his lips and sucking on it.

I shuddered as I tilted my pelvis and ground down on his thigh with force, holding his gaze, and pleasure washed through me. A cry escaped me—needy, desperate, noisy. I loved being noisy.

Pure ecstasy had my back arching, a passion pounding through me that I'd only read about. Hard. Fast. Wet. I'd never even been able to describe a scene this erotic in the books I was most proud of.

His hand wrapped around my nape, pulling me down and taking my mouth in a hard, wet kiss, his tongue dominating as I whimpered and moaned. Finally, I felt the dregs of my release ripple through my body.

But it still wasn't enough now. I needed more. I needed his dick.

When I came back from the edge, sprawled on top of Manuel, my muscles reduced to jelly, he released my mouth.

My forehead rested against his and I breathed heavily.

"You'll give me one more," he rasped, once again sending goose bumps scattering over my slick flesh.

This man had given me two of the most intense orgasms of my life. It was like he knew what I wanted and needed better than I did.

His hand swept down my back affectionately, and I mentally cataloged his tenderness for the hero in my next novel. This man had all the traits a woman would lose her mind for—insane sex drive, a body even ancient gods would be jealous of, and a hint of badass charisma. Or maybe my mind was conjuring it all after spotting a single tattoo on his back, a skull wrapped in thorns and roses.

I lifted my head and pressed my mouth to his.

"You said three," I murmured against his lips, then shifted so I could straddle his big body, feeling like the goddess of sex—powerful, seductive, and irresistible. The look in Manuel's eyes was feeding it.

"Are you going to fuck me and make me forget my promise?" he rasped, and I leaned back, the tips of my hair falling over his tanned skin and dusting across the most magnificent abs I'd ever seen.

"No, Manuel," I murmured, peering down my nose at him. "I'm going to ride you like a rodeo."

The reaction wasn't exactly what I was going for. He blinked, watching me with a blank expression that hinted once more to a language barrier.

I cleared my throat, my aroused flush suddenly replaced by slight embarrassment. "I'm going to ride you like a stallion."

Still no reaction. Maybe he'd never heard the figure of speech before?

I stared at him, wondering how to come off sounding like a polished writer and seductress of a hot, older man who obviously knew what he was doing. I was out of my depth, desperately searching for something to get this show back on the road.

"I'm going to ride you like a... hot Italian daddy?" It came out more as a question than I'd been going for, but before I could ponder on it, Manuel grinned and shifted, lacing his hands behind his head as if to make himself comfortable.

"You should have started with that, *amorina*. Forget horses and cowboys. Now ride me."

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FIVE MANUEL



I'd well and truly wrecked this girl, but *cazzo*, she was wrecking me too. My nostrils flared as I tried to drag air into my lungs, every muscle in my body tight, ready to pin her down and thrust. But she wanted to ride me, so I would let her. Just this once.

Then I would rut into her like a beast. Like I'd lost my goddamn mind.

I slapped her ass. "I need your pussy to be strangling my cock. Right now."

She put one hand on my chest and took me with the other. She lined it up with her entrance, and before she began to lower, I bucked my hips, eager to get all the way in, filling her to the hilt.

"Holy shit, Manuel," she breathed, curling her fingers into my shoulders and bracing herself against me. "You're big."

"Cazzo, la tua figa è stretta."

Her green gaze glazed over with lust and she clenched around my shaft.

"Fuck, keep speaking Italian while you fuck me," she panted, grinding against me. "What does it mean?"

"It means your pussy is tight as hell."

"Dirty talker, huh."

"Start bucking or this ride is over," I growled. It was a bluff, even wild horses couldn't pull me away from her at this moment.

"Fuck, your dick is huge."

She closed her eyes, rolling her hips tentatively, but I was too far gone and my balls ached, ready to burst. I needed to find my release, but I'd be

damned if I orgasmed before her.

Bending my knees, my feet propped on the mattress, I thrust up while dragging her hips down, impaling her fully again.

“*Cazzo*,” I gritted, her gasping breath brushing against my mouth.

Her hips rocked, her movements measured and achingly slow. My balls instantly tightened, lust shooting straight to my groin like a lightning bolt. She felt so goddamn good, like heaven and hell at the same time.

I grabbed her by the back of the neck and slammed my mouth on hers.

“*Sei mia, sì?*”

“Fuck, whatever you want,” she panted, our hips moving in sync and our bodies slick with our sweat. “Just don’t stop.”

“Good girl,” I crooned, my voice rough with the need to come. I pushed my hand into her hair and fisted it hard. “Now ride me like you promised.”

I held her, not giving her much room to move, but she canted her hips, sliding her pussy up and down my dick, her tits bouncing against my chest. She continued to work herself on my cock, her lids closed and her gorgeous body shimmering with sweat.

I could feel her legs trembling, her muscles tightening, and she took everything she wanted and gave me everything I needed. I’d seen her come twice already and it still wasn’t enough. I needed to see her come on my dick. Reaching down, I found her clit with my thumb, but I only brushed it lightly, teasing her.

“Oh... please... yes,” she panted, sliding both hands into her hair as she leaned back, her eyelids shut tight. I grabbed one of her full breasts with my hand, squeezing hard and pinching her nipple, twisting it between my fingertips.

“*Guardami*,” I told her, forcing her eyes to mine. “Watch me.”

Her gaze flicked to mine and she moaned, her pussy constricting around me. I circled her clit again, rubbing and pressing while she rocked, and it only took a minute for her walls to clamp down and milk my cock.

The bliss on her face was a sight to behold, her soft moans filling the hotel suite. I couldn’t hold back anymore. My balls tightened and my body seized as my cock swelled inside her, the orgasm rushing over me. I pulled out just in time, coating her pussy, stomach, and inner thighs with bursts of my cum.

I shouted, the world going dark while the climax dragged me down. It was the most intense orgasm I’d ever experienced.

“You’ll be my muse,” she whispered dreamily, her body lax and sated.

Then she collapsed on top of me as I tried to catch my breath, her skin smeared and marked by me. I wrapped my arms around her and knew I wouldn’t be letting go anytime soon.

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SIX

ATHENA



I couldn't breathe.
The world was dark, suffocating me with each passing second. I thrashed my arms and legs, desperate to escape. Fire was getting closer, licking at my skin.

I woke up with a gasp, a muscular leg hooked over me and a pair of strong, corded forearms folded around my waist. I looked around wildly, certain I was back in that box. The scar on my shoulder burned, but I resisted the urge to reach behind me. My chest tightened painfully before my eyes found the window and I breathed a sigh of relief. The moon was glimmering over the city. There was a way out of here, a way to escape, even if I had to jump.

All was well with the world.

My attention returned to the man sound asleep next to me. The same man who'd thoroughly fucked me, leaving every inch of me blissed out and boneless.

But reality called, and I had to pee.

Careful not to wake up Manuel, I slid out of bed and padded toward the bathroom. Once I took care of my business, I washed off and pulled on a robe that was about five sizes too big but smelled like him. I brushed my teeth with a new toothbrush I'd found in a cabinet and combed my fingers through my hair.

I caught my reflection in the mirror and paused at the woman staring back at me. My lips were swollen and pinkish burns from his rough stubble

marred my skin. I was sure the look on my face was a testament to the fact that I had been to sex-heaven and back.

Padding into the bedroom, I reached for Manuel's discarded clothes, and as I did, a wallet tumbled out, its contents scattering over the floor. Shit. Kneeling down, I reached for the first item—a license—and glanced at the photo. A name caught my eye.

Manuel Marchetti.

Marchetti...

"What the fuck?" I murmured under my breath, certain my eyes were deceiving me.

I focused my gaze and read the name again.

My heart stopped. A memory flickered in the back of my mind, and recognition slammed into me in full force.

"Manuel Marchetti," I whispered the name I'd nearly forgotten.

My breathing turned shallow as my heart thumped so hard, I feared it'd burst out of my chest. It couldn't be... Yet, in my heart, I knew he was. Yes, he was older, his features sharper, and Jesus, he was a lot more handsome, but he was the very same Manuel Marchetti who dated my mother all those years ago—however briefly. The one who'd caught us red-handed in our little deceit.

And the one I'd...

Oh. My. Fucking. God.



Walk of shame.

It was bound to happen at some point in every girl's life, and today was my turn. I just wished it didn't have to come after such an incredible night. And I certainly didn't expect to lose my panties and bra in the process. After learning the identity of my one-night stand and being unable to find my undergarments, I put my dress on and hauled ass out of there.

I strolled through the streets of Paris as the city awakened, the cool breeze cooling my still heated skin as images of my night flashed through my mind like a B-grade Hollywood montage. *Why* did I have to have that last shot at the club? Unfortunately, the memories from all those years ago came ripping in, no matter how hard I tried to shut them down.

“What if we get caught, Mama?” I whispered, staring at the heavy concealer hiding the bruises on her neck and face. After last night’s events, neither one of us slept a wink. We huddled in our apartment, waiting for dawn. Mom didn’t want to run. She wanted to finish her last performance and get paid for it. Part of me understood, but that didn’t mean I had to be happy about it.

“Baby, I wouldn’t ask this of you if it wasn’t absolutely necessary,” she claimed. “You love me, right?” I nodded. “Do this for me, then. Don’t be like your father.”

I never wanted to be like him. All Mama did was love him and he hurt her, leaving her full of pain and suffering.

“I’m scared,” I whispered.

“You know the words, Athena,” she answered in a rough, broken voice. Mother’s vocal cords were damaged and they’d need time to heal. Right now, she sounded like a smoker. “Your voice is even better than mine.”

I shook my head. “But you have a date afterward. How will you explain?”

My mother was a beautiful woman even when she wasn’t wearing a shimmering gold Oscar de la Renta gown. Her vibrant green eyes, olive skin, and dark hair had men falling at her feet. She had no issues using it to her advantage by pulling the wool over their eyes. Everything she did was for us.

“Let me worry about that,” she rasped. “You sing like our lives depend on it.” Ironically, they did. We needed the money from this performance to escape back to the States. “Can you do that for me, yavrum?” My baby. Mama never reverted to Greek unless she was stressed or scared.

Or needed something from me.

With a heavy heart, I nodded and she pressed a kiss on my forehead. “Thank you.”

With a quick mic test and a terse nod, she left me in the corner of the stage, right behind the curtain, and rushed out.

I held my breath, waiting for the welcoming applause to die down. She loved the opera, but she loved the attention even more. She lived for it. I loved to sing, that feeling of being carried away and the world ceasing to exist, but I hated the spotlight. It’s why I knew I’d never follow in my mother’s footsteps, no matter how much she insisted.

The first notes traveled through the air and that same floating feeling took hold of me.

I sang for Mom, who was always here. For Father, who never was.

I closed my eyes, my lungs full as I sang a high C, drawing notes and emotions from somewhere deep, somewhere I rarely went. I gave it my all, pulling from my diaphragm. The words squeezed my lungs.

As the last note vibrated through the space, a silence followed.

Soft. Nostalgic. Dark.

I stood frozen as the last note left my lips and the sad, Italian words rattled my bones. My eyes burned behind my closed lids, so many emotions bouncing around my chest.

It was wrong that Mom and I were cheating. It was wrong that I was singing, but I wanted to go back to America. We'd been on the road far too long, and I missed the smell of burgers, steamed crabs, and the bay.

I missed it all.

Silence descended over the grand opera house, and I was reminded—not for the first time—of how the stage beneath my feet had stood for centuries. I felt privileged to be here but wished it were under less deceitful circumstances. Almost as if the universe had been listening, my eyes fluttered open and I found a shape towering over me, the stage lights too dim to make it out. I squinted, letting my eyes adjust, and was met with a furious gaze.

I gasped audibly. We were caught.

I tried to bolt, but I stumbled and collided with a hard body.

My head shot up, my cheeks flaming.

It hit me then who I had collided with... My mother's date. The only reason I recognized him was because I spied on him through the curtains of our temporary apartment as my mom would go out to meet him. I thought he was the most handsome man I'd ever seen.

Manuel Marchetti.

"I'm sorry, sir," I blurted, looking frantically for my mom—anyone—to save me.

Then, resigned to being caught, I swallowed a lump in my throat and met those eyes, only to do something stupid.

Curling my hands into fists, I pounded on his stomach, hoping he'd fall over and give Mom and me a window to escape. It didn't. Instead, he froze, grabbed my shoulders, and pulled me away. His dark eyes met mine, my

heart thundering partly in disbelief of what I'd done and partly in fear, but before he could take us to the opera manager and end Mom's career, I kicked his shin and bolted.

That wasn't my first encounter with violence, and unfortunately not the last either.

For many years after, I'd wondered about this man, but over the years, I remembered less and less of his features. And the horrible event that had followed a few days later made that whole incident fade into the corners of my memory.

Although, now that I thought back, I remembered fantasizing for several days about wedding bells and the white dress I'd wear when I married him. Because much to my delight, he broke up with Mama that same day. He was the first man to do so, and much to my relief, she never learned that he'd found out about our little scheme.

Never in a million years did I imagine I'd end up having a one-night stand with him.

"Small world," I muttered softly to myself. *Too small.*

The City of Light's paved sidewalks welcomed the clacking of my Louboutins. I cursed the Athena of yesterday who'd insisted on wearing sky-high heels that made me look just a bit like a hooker—a tired, famished hooker.

The streets were lined with cafés preparing to open, but none of it would help my hunger now. I sighed exhaustedly just as a set of hands wrapped around me.

"Fuck," I hissed, whirling around and bringing a hand to my racing heart. "You scared me, Raven."

She looked at me with a playful expression. "Maybe you should be scared. I've been stalking you for the past five minutes and you didn't notice me."

"Maybe you should stop stalking me," I said, narrowing my eyes as they raked over her. She was in the same clothes as last night too. "Where are you coming from?"

She shrugged. "I ran into... someone, and decided to scratch the itch."

I raised my brow, waiting for her to elaborate, but the look in her eyes was my answer.

"Not Aiden Callahan," I breathed. "Jesus, it must have been a full moon last night."

Raven slipped her hand into mine and we resumed walking. “Why? Did you hook up with a mafioso too?” I shot her a wry look and she gasped. “Oh my gosh, you did!”

I sighed. “Why do you sound so proud?”

Raven’s full lips curved into a smile. “I don’t know. Maybe it makes me feel better about myself.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“So how was it? *Who* was it?” she asked curiously. I blanched for a second, wondering how I was going to explain the mess, when she pivoted topics and blurted, “Fuck, my feet hurt and my pussy’s wrecked.”

We shared a glance, then burst into a fit of giggles. “I guess I know how your night was. And before you want too many details, mine was about the same and I’d prefer not to talk about it.”

She bumped her shoulder against mine. “Well, maybe it’ll be the inspiration you’ve been searching for.”

A wistful exhale passed my lungs. “You have no idea.”

She giggled. “I can’t wait to read it.”

I waved my hand, tabling that discussion for now. “By the way, did you get a message from Reina?”

A guilty expression flashed across her face. “Yeah, but then Aiden kissed me and I forgot all about her. Damn, that man has got *moves*.”

This time I smiled. “He’s that good, huh?”

“So good that I could orgasm just by his tongue, and fuck, he also uses *that* in all kinds of ways.”

Images of Manuel’s tongue buried in my pussy taunted me, my core pulsing with need. It was alarming, feeling such intense attraction toward anyone. Yes, I wrote about love and lust and chemistry, but it was entirely different experiencing it firsthand. Not that I was a virgin—God no. But most of my encounters lacked that deeper connection.

I gave my head a subtle shake, forcing the memories from my mind.

“Well, you wouldn’t believe how I embarrassed myself,” I started. “I got really enthusiastic and blurted out that I’d ride him like a rodeo.” A beat of silence passed before she burst into a full-blown laugh, tears lining her eyes. “Don’t worry, I’d laugh too,” I muttered. “You should have seen the way he stared at me.”

She wiped tears from her eyes.

"I'm sorry, I'm picturing it and..." She collapsed into another fit of hysterical giggles. I couldn't help smiling at her enthusiasm. "I'm assuming he wasn't an American."

I rolled my eyes. "No, Italian. I realize now that rodeos are probably not a thing over there."

"Apparently not."

Eager to shift the attention away from me, I focused on her.

"Do you think it's smart to get involved with the head of the Callahan mafia?" I asked her, reaching over and squeezing her arm gently. "Trouble follows the mafiosos wherever they go. And we all know how things ended last time."

She poked me in the stomach, looking at me skeptically. "You're supposed to be the romantic one."

"I am, but you need to ask yourself whether Aiden Callahan is a man you can have no-strings sex with."

"I won't fall for him again," she said, although deep down, I didn't think she even believed herself. "I can't help that he's obsessed with my golden pussy." She wagged her brows, and I grinned despite myself.

"Yeah, what is it with these mafiosos being obsessed with us?" I said, a hint of sarcasm in my tone.

Raven bit her lip, her eyes shining with mischief. "It's probably all your talk about riding a donkey."

I snorted. "I didn't say donkey."

She waved her hand in the air. "Minor detail."

I snort-laughed. "Last time I checked, there were no donkeys at the rodeo."

"There are plenty of asses frequenting it though."

I grinned. "Don't tell me you have something against cowboys." She shook her head, and I gave her a look like, *Ah, I see*. "You prefer mobsters."

"Apparently so do you," she remarked pointedly. "From the way you look properly sexed up, I bet you'd go another round with your Italian mobster."

She laughed, and so did I.

But nothing was funny about the butterflies whirling around my stomach at the thought of being with Manuel again.

SEVEN

ATHENA



“We’re *what*?” I shouted, staring at the four sets of eyes before me, crammed inside our apartment’s living room.

“We’re breaking into a bookstore,” Raven said, like she’d just recommended a spa day.

“Are you trying to get me locked up for my birthday?” I mumbled, my gaze traveling over my friends who were nonchalantly holding boxes of my signed books.

“Of course not,” Raven deadpanned. “We want you to have the best birthday.”

“Then let’s go clubbing,” I suggested. “Not break into a damned bookstore.”

“No can do,” Isla muttered. “Raven got it into her head that this is the best gift we could give you and now we must follow through.”

I shook my head. “Does it matter what the birthday girl wants?”

“Birthday girl is confused,” Reina chimed in unhelpfully. “We can go clubbing right after we stock the shelves with your beautiful smut.”

Phoenix set her box down and signed. “*It’s for the good of humanity.*”

“And women’s libidos,” Raven added.

I snorted. “They could watch porn, you know.”

Reina tsked. “Don’t dismiss your talent. Your stories are beautiful. Yes, they have smut and a lot of... fucking, but they’re a dream come true for your readers.”

“Yes,” Raven claimed. “They’re Oscars material.”

I narrowed my eyes on them. “Are you all high?”

A giggle escaped one of them and it was a rolling effect from there.

“How come nobody offered me a joint?” I asked when we all settled down, crossing my arms over my chest. “After all, it’s *my* birthday.”

Silence descended. Dilated pupils stared back at me.

And then a loud shout. “HAPPY BIRTHDAY!”

Suddenly, confetti fell and balloons floated to the ceiling as the girls ran up to me and wrapped me in a hug.

“Do you want a joint?” Raven asked, frowning. “Will it make you braver for our bookstore operation?”

Laughing, I kissed all their cheeks one by one. “I think so.”

Thirty minutes later, we giddily stumbled our way to the bookstore, hands full of boxes.

Looking inconspicuous and completely innocent—*right*—we made our way into the alley, our steps slightly unsteady and our giggles incessant. We’d laughed so much my cheeks hurt, and it was already the perfect birthday.

Until we got to the side metal door. Raven stopped, confused, and we all followed suit, her eyes darting between the door and the window five feet away.

“What is it?” I singsonged.

“It seems wrong to go through the door,” she muttered.

I glanced over my shoulder at the rest of the girls.

“*What is she saying?*” Phoenix signed.

Reina lowered her box and told her sister, “*She thinks we shouldn’t go through the door.*”

“Why not?” Isla seemed as confused as the rest of us. “Don’t book suppliers go through the door?”

Raven whirled around. “Yes, but during business hours.”

I looked around left and right, the world tilting on its axis. “It looks like daytime to me.”

“But are they open?” Raven demanded to know.

I frowned, my brain too slow to process her question.

“*Are they?*” Phoenix signed.

“How in the fuck should I know?” I hissed. “I thought we had a plan?”

Isla shrugged. “Well, we kind of did. We just have to get in.”

Raven pouted, looking around the alley, her gaze landing on the window.

“We’ll go in through that window,” she declared, pointing as if there weren’t multiple windows in the alley.

A dry breath escaped me, suddenly feeling as if I needed another hit of that joint to survive this.

“Oh, look,” Isla said, stepping around me. “Raven’s ass is hanging out.”

As if pulled by the same string, we all turned around to find Raven’s upper body inside the window, her ripped yoga pants giving us the perfect view of her bare ass.

Two heartbeats passed before we burst into full-blown belly laughs that had us folding over.

“Stop laughing and help me,” Raven grunted.

One shared glance with the girls and we howled and roared as tears pricked our eyes.

“Come on, girls, I’m stuck,” Raven whined.

Isla bumped shoulders with me, then pushed me away playfully. “You help her.”

“But I’m the birthday girl,” I grumbled, but I was already making my way to the window. “Stop moving, Raven. I don’t want to touch your naked ass. I love you, but not that much.”

From the sound of it, the girls were rolling on the ground behind me as I awkwardly attempted to grab Raven’s legs. Despite my complaining, I was lucky to find friends who could be as crazy as I was. Not many people could say the same.

“Stop kicking,” I yelled, drawing hushed scolds from the girls. “You almost knocked my teeth out and broke my nose.”

No sooner had she stilled than I grabbed her ankles and pushed her inside. She landed with a thunk.

It wasn’t until we were in the small room on the inside that Reina asked, “What about the boxes of books?”

Fuck. Me.

I stepped around her and was just about to climb out the same window, praying I didn’t smash my face, when a voice came behind us.

“Why in the fuck are you coming through the window? I said to come through the front door.”

We all whirled around to find a man, well over six feet, leaning against the wall, his hands in the pockets of his jeans and black T-shirt tight across his chest.

“Kyran Callahan,” Raven exclaimed. “Where the fuck were you?”

His eyes rested on Raven before moving over the rest of us and letting out a string of curses under his breath.

“Are you all fucking drunk?” He did not seem very happy.

We all shook our heads. “No.”

“Absolutely not.”

“Just high as a kiiiite,” Reina sang.

Raven, Isla, Phoenix, and I facepalmed, shook our heads in shame, then laughed our asses off. Being high was hilarious.

Kyran muttered another string of expletives, then pushed off the wall and muttered, “God spare me from these women.” He walked away from us and looked over his shoulder when none of us moved. “Follow me.” When we stayed standing, he barked, “Now.”

We scrambled after him, sharing glances and looking back at the window and beyond, as if we could x-ray through the wall and see our boxes.

“Who’s Kyran?” Isla asked.

“Aiden’s brother,” I muttered. “He’s hot, but he’s trouble.”

“I can hear you,” he said, not slowing his pace.

“Kyran, we left our stuff outside the window,” Isla stated matter-of-factly. “And while I appreciate following your gorgeous ass, we need them. Otherwise, this birthday gift has gone to shit.”

“Too late,” Reina muttered, rolling her eyes. “And for the record, his ass is not that great. I’ve seen better.”

Mental note: *Never let Reina get high again.*

Kyran stopped, causing Raven and me to bump into his back. I swore I could see him inhale a calming breath before turning around.

“While you five were hanging your asses out of the window, I had one of my men bring them in.” He pointed to the right, and sure enough, there they sat, waiting for us in front of an empty shelf. “Now stock your shit and get out.”

I rubbed my forehead—was his back made of steel or something?—and sidestepped him.

“Worst birthday ever.”

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EIGHT MANUEL



“So, how is the search for Atticus going?” Enrico asked from across his large mahogany desk.

It had been a week since my encounter with the Triads’ scout, but the Chinese mafia was the last thing on my mind. Instead, it was entirely focused on my night with the beautiful Greek goddess—to her moans, the way her body had writhed under mine, the startled sounds she released once I began to move inside her. I’d woken up, my dick hard as a rock, eager for another round.

Except the woman—Athena—had left my bed, leaving behind only her lingerie.

I forced the memory from my thoughts, leaning back in the leather chair and crossing my ankle over my knee.

“It would seem Atticus was indeed in Paris.”

The day after I shot that Triads’ man between the eyes, Ghost—Kingston Ashford—was able to trace Atticus to a shitty hotel outside Paris. The billionaire Atticus Popov, disguised as a poor bum, checked in under the name of Alexander Great—no fucking joke. The problem was, by the time I got there, he’d already disappeared.

“Have any clues as to why?”

I rubbed my chin. Although there were several theories, only one seemed likely. Atticus was here for business. Why he would hide under an alias in a dump of a hotel was a different question—one I didn’t yet have the answer to. Then there were all my contacts who indicated that he hadn’t

approached them. Whatever the fuck he was doing, it wasn't above board. If he wasn't reaching out to the Omertà's contacts, disrespecting the lines of our territories, it must mean he was up to something sketchy.

But what exactly?

Maybe Atticus had a mistress here. After all, he was known to have those all over the world—before, during, and after his marriage. Still though... it didn't add up. He usually kept his mistresses on a short leash, not roaming the city of love.

"Manuel!" Enrico snapped, and I jerked my attention back to him.

"Nothing concrete," I answered, recalling his question. "Still running down some leads. I want to eliminate all options to ensure he's not trying to poach more territory."

"The Popov family is getting too large and too powerful," Enrico agreed, giving me a curt nod. "Their reach now extends beyond the Balkans."

Rumor was that Danil Popov, Atticus's son, ran it all, after one too many of his father's fuckups. Over the past twenty years, criminal groups from the Western Balkans had become key actors in the global drug trade. Balkan networks were involved in heroin, cocaine, and cannabis production, and they trafficked from Latin America into ports in Western and Southeastern Europe. And the Popovs were behind it all.

"There's a rumor that Atticus has an illegitimate daughter," my nephew, although he was only a few years younger than me, continued when I remained quiet.

My brows scrunched. "Nicki Popova? That bitch isn't illegitimate. Just fucking crazy, not to mention in *prison*."

He shook his head.

"No, not Nicki. She's legitimate, and anyway, she's on house arrest in one of Danil's castles here in Europe. He managed to work out a deal with a judge he had in his pocket."

Idiot.

He should have left his crazy sister behind the thickest bars he could find. The woman was a stalker who didn't understand when she wasn't wanted. Apparently, Nicki spent years obsessed with Byron Ashford. When the man refused her, more than once, she went after his woman, Odette Swan. Let's just say it didn't end well for her.

“What do we know about this other daughter?” I questioned. “The illegitimate one.”

He shrugged. “Practically nothing. Speculations, assuming she’s real.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Well, that helps,” I said. “Should I start by asking every woman if she’s either Atticus’s mistress or daughter?” He flipped me off, but he knew I was right. We needed more information if we had any hope of locating the daughter. “Where did you hear about it anyhow?”

“Lykos. He seemed rather confident about it.”

“He usually keeps information on need-to-know, why would he share it with you?”

“Well, he was rather hammered when he did. He said something about her being murdered but then resurfacing.” When my eyebrow arched, he shrugged. “That’s all I know.”

I tilted my head, my mind working furiously.

“Maybe Atticus was here to reconnect with this mysterious illegitimate daughter,” I speculated. “It would make sense if he checked into a hotel under a fake—and dumb—name.”

“Well, let’s try to find her first. Maybe we’ll be able to hold her against him,” Enrico stated, focusing back on his computer screen. “He’s been a thorn in our side for long enough.”

NINE

ATHENA



During my hour-long flight to Spain, I tried to distract myself with writing, but each time it came to my hero's point of view, my mind wandered to the man I spent a single, incredible night with.

Manuel Marchetti.

Of all the men on this planet, why did it have to be him? And why hadn't I recognized him?

The man had gotten even better looking with age. And imposing. Manuel Marchetti was tall, handsome, and sinful. And oh lord, between the sheets, he was the devil himself.

Slamming my laptop shut, I gave up on writing. The last thing I needed was to get turned on thinking about the man who'd caught me and my mother in our little lip-syncing—although justified—scheme.

I brought a hand up to my face and sighed. I'd been drifting back to the memories I'd repressed from all those years ago. The evening that seemed to start my nightmare.

My blood ran cold as I watched the scene unfold through the crack in the closet door.

I stared at my mama in shock and horror as men wearing masks and dressed all in black surrounded her. She'd shoved me in here, disoriented and still half asleep.

But I was awake now, and I was terrified.

Why were these men here, and why was Mama on the floor on her hands and knees? She was crying and pleading in words I couldn't comprehend.

They weren't English.

My breathing was labored and my heart raced against my chest, pounding painfully against my rib cage.

"I don't know anything," my mom screamed—in English now, I realized. "I have nothing to do with Atticus."

Was she talking about my father? The man who abandoned us?

Mom never spoke about him; she wouldn't even tell me whether he was alive or dead. Nothing. I'd dreamt about him my entire life, hoped he'd come and find us. He never did.

The only thing that followed us was trouble though, and something told me it had everything to do with him.

A scream filled the air as I silently fell to my knees, watching my mother tortured.

"Where is the child?"

I reached for her, fighting the urge to go to her, but I made a promise. I had to stay hidden.

My mother wrapped her arms around her waist as if to shield herself, but before she had a chance, a booted foot connected with her abdomen. I bit into my hand, holding my screams back.

I wanted to kick them and set my mom free. I was already back on my feet, ready to push through, when Mom's voice stilled me. "I'm okay. Promise, I'm okay."

A cold metal blade touched the side of her neck while I stood frozen, my eyes locked on the gun pointed at her temple. She wasn't okay, yet I didn't know what to do or how to save her.

My lips moved, wanting to yell out for her, fear widening my eyes as tears streamed down Mama's beautiful face.

"I'm okay," she croaked again, her slim body that could produce the most beautiful soprano notes shaking terribly. I wished I was strong enough to protect her. I hated seeing her scared, her body trembling like a leaf in the wind.

A laugh vibrated through our terror, and my mother's eyes shot up to the man pointing the gun at her.

"So sweet," he drawled, his voice muffled behind the mask. "But you won't be fine unless you give me what I came for."

My eyes focused on the man as our apartment quieted, matching the midnight hour of the little Italian town we were visiting for Mama's

performance at the opera house. My gaze slipped up to the tattooed hand holding the gun—an odd-looking symbol settled in the mouth of a skull.

Before I could dwell on it, a voice sent ice down my spine.

“Let’s make sure the great Alexandra Bottelli can’t sing tomorrow,” he purred, a wicked smile curving behind the thin material of the mask.

My throat bobbed, my heart thudding. The men began to laugh harshly and my eyes fell to the matching tattoos on their hands. There were four other men in the room—two with guns and two with blades.

“I don’t know anything,” Mom whispered quietly. “Please spare—”

Her words were cut short as a hand wrapped around her throat. Her perfect ivory skin quickly turned pink, then red, then purple as the man squeezed.

“Please, she needs her voice!” I whispered my silent pleas as her violent scream ricocheted against the walls of our little apartment.

I was such a coward, hiding in the closet, watching my mom being hurt. It didn’t matter I made a promise, I should be brave enough to charge in there and attack them all to protect her.

Another heart-wrenching scream tore out of my mama and through the apartment, and a hand slapped her across the face, making her blink, disoriented.

“Stop screaming,” the man snarled viciously, wrapping his big hand around her throat. “Or I’ll give you something to scream about.”

The sudden, eerily stillness of the room was only broken by my mother’s gurgles. My mind chanted “please stop, please stop,” but no words left my lips.

“I’m here to avenge what was stolen.” I dragged my gaze back to the man looming over her. “You know what it was,” he purred. My brows knitted, and my gaze darted between him and my mother.

The man’s gaze was full of dark fury and hatred that stole my breath away. He released her throat.

“It’s an eye for an eye. Where is she?” he roared. “Where is your daughter, whore?”

I shook in my hiding spot, my teeth sinking into the flesh of my hand to keep my whimpers from being heard.

My mother gasped for air, her breaths filling the room as she slumped to the wooden floor. Her attention snapped to the wall next to me, watching it with a haunted expression.

“I don’t have her,” Mom rasped, her voice barely a whisper. But I was too terrified to worry about her vocal cords now or what it was that they wanted. “I don’t know where she is. I gave her up for adoption.”

My brows furrowed, unable to follow the conversation.

“Then I suggest you find her,” the man growled. “You have a week to get us answers. Or I’ll cut you up, piece by fucking piece.”

I stared in horror.

Mom shuddered. “Please! I don’t know how—”

The man slapped her across the face again, sending her body flying across the room.

I bit into my hand, holding back my screams and resisting the urge to rush to her.

“Do. We. Understand. Each. Other?”

My mama looked up and nodded without a word, and the men left our apartment like ghosts, disappearing into the night.

It wasn’t until she came for me that I dared to move. It wasn’t until then that I noticed I’d soiled myself.

“I’m okay,” she whispered, her voice hoarse as she wrapped me in her arms and we sobbed against each other.

I wondered what Manuel would say if he knew I was the daughter of his once-upon-a-time mistress. The great Alexandra Maria Bottelli’s daughter. She was always careful to keep that fact from her lovers—and there were plenty of those.

It’s safer that way, she’d say.

I wanted to believe her, especially after what I’d witnessed eleven years ago, but sometimes I wondered if she was keeping me a secret to sell her appeal better. It filled me with shame, and the possibility made my heart clench painfully, but I couldn’t help the way I felt. After so many years, I thought I’d be used to it, but it still nagged at me. We were each other’s only family.

I could still taste the terror from that night and see the fear that lurked in Mom’s eyes. She did it all to protect me, I reminded myself.

Before long, the flight ended and I descended the stairs. The scent of the morning air in Seville hit my nostrils. Lavender, citrus, and most of all, orange blossoms. And it was then that I spotted my mother.

Emotions swirled through me, but I held them in until we were alone. A bodyguard took my bag with a nod, then my mom took my hand

wordlessly, squeezing gently as we were guided off the tarmac. There was a limo waiting for us, and the driver held the door open.

It wasn't until we took off driving and the divider was up that my mother wrapped me in a warm hug.

"I missed you so much," she whispered into my ear. I loved my mother and I knew she loved me, but feigning we were just friends hurt sometimes.

"Ditto," I admitted, inhaling her familiar perfume that smelled of lilacs and... comfort. My chest flooded with warmth at this rare show of affection. The years had been kind to her physically, but I knew she suffered mentally. Silently.

My phone buzzed and I glanced at the message. It was from the girls' group chat.

Raven: We need a game night.

Reina: What did you have in mind?

Phoenix: Clue?

Reina: We all know the killer, so it would be a moot point.

I winced, knowing exactly what she was implying. It was hard to forget something that changed you so profoundly.

Isla: We're all the killers, but let's pick a different game. Strip poker?

Phoenix: Isla just wants to strip for her hot Italian daddy.

I winced, my own hot Italian daddy rushing to mind, and no offense to Isla, but mine was a thousand times better. Not that I'd bring him up. I quickly typed my response.

I'm back tomorrow. Wait for me.

Raven: I don't want to see you girls naked. Maybe we can find a few guys to play with.

I shook my head.

Good luck with that.

I shoved my phone back into my purse and met my mother's smiling face. "I'm happy you have good friends. It's one thing I lacked, although I had my sister for a little bit."

I took both her hands in mine, guilt eating at me. “It’s because you got pregnant with me.”

“The best gift ever.” Her voice was breathless, but delight wreathed her face. “You’re going to be smarter than me, and we already know you’re a much better singer than me.” She winked, but I saw a cloud of something cross her face... sadness, maybe?

I wrapped my arms around her again and breathed her in. I didn’t want her to see guilt in my eyes, but she must have sensed something because she pulled back, scanning my face.

While we shared the same eye coloring, as I got older, I must have taken after my father. I didn’t have a single picture of him, but Mom let it slip once that my sharing anything with *that man* broke her heart. Little did she know, it broke my heart too.

“You’re not singing,” Mom said simply.

“I’m taking classes,” I retorted as truthfully as I could.

Her brow furrowed. “What classes? You’re done with your college years.”

“Voice lessons. Interval training helps train my voice to greater precision.” Mom nodded, but her quizzical gaze remained on me. We both knew that unless I actually sang, voice lessons were for nothing. “I love singing,” I sighed. “I really do, but I hate performing on the stage alone. You know how when you perform, you’re center stage?” She nodded. “I don’t want that.”

I didn’t want to tell her that every time I stood on a stage, that night came rushing back to me. She didn’t need any extra guilt eating at her.

“But you’re the only legacy I’m leaving behind.”

I let out an uncomfortable laugh while my chest squeezed painfully.

“You’re making it sound like you’re dying.” When she said nothing, I stiffened and gave her another look. She looked great, as always—beautiful and breathtaking—but there was a new paleness to her skin and dark shadows under her eyes. “Mom, are you okay?”

Mom’s lips quirked. “Of course. I’m just worried.”

“About what?”

“Nothing important.”

It’d been months since I visited, but it felt longer. The lightness I used to attribute to her was gone, and in its place was something I didn’t recognize.

I glanced out the window at the unfamiliar landscape. “We’re not going to the manor?”

My mother, the famous opera singer, had lived in Spain for the past decade as a mistress to the head of Miñanco—the Spanish mafia—under his protection. Emiliano Ortega, her lover, was the reason she’d been able to afford an elite boarding school and private college for me. She made good money as a singer, but not enough to support her lavish lifestyle and my private education.

Before he came along and became a permanent fixture in my mom’s life, I remembered her lovers being wealthy and generous, and that Mom kept me mostly out of sight, claiming I was her deceased best friend’s daughter. The men were blind enough to believe it, and enamored enough that they didn’t ask many questions.

Of course, my best friends knew the truth. I slipped once and then swore them to secrecy. Considering the secrets we kept for each other, it was an easy promise given and kept by every single one of them.

“Not this time,” she said. “I want to have you all to myself. Like the good old days.”

Warmth washed over me. There had been many days we ran, hid, and lived in fear, but I vividly remembered the ones where she would wake me up at the crack of dawn to go swimming. Or she’d surprise me at school with a bouquet of flowers, checking me out early to get our nails done.

Until everything changed, of course.

It wasn’t long before the car pulled up in front of Hotel Alfonso XIII, a luxury hotel in the heart of Seville, and we made our way to the top-floor suite.

“Well, this feels like *déjà vu*,” I muttered under my breath, thinking back to my one-night stand.

“What was that, Athena?” Mom asked.

I waved my hand. “Oh, nothing.”

“I still can’t believe you’re here,” Mom said. “We can catch up on what you’ve been doing and talk about your mom. I miss her so much. You must too.”

I swallowed, smiling tightly. Some things never changed. “I do.”

I hated the pretense, but there was no way around it—not when her bodyguard stood so closely and likely received paychecks signed by the head of the Spanish mafia.

The elevator dinged and opened into the luxurious hotel suite. Her guard went ahead and we stepped out, waiting for him to clear it. Once he reappeared, he gave her a terse, wordless nod and stepped back into the elevator, then disappeared out of sight.

Mom and I sighed, sharing a glance, and she smiled.

“Go ahead and pick the room you want. I’ll make us a cup of coffee.”

I made my way through each of the bedrooms and opted for the first one, the view of Seville stretching in front of its expansive window. I dropped my bag on the luggage stand and joined Mom in the kitchen.

She handed me my mug and we settled next to each other on the plush linen couch. Mom smiled at me over the lip of her mug.

“Now tell me the reason for this sudden visit.”

I let out a breath. “Well, I’ve missed you.”

She tilted her head. “You’ve missed me before and it didn’t prompt a visit.”

She was right. We’d always done it this way to ensure our safety. I steeled my spine for the conversation we were about to have. My mom hated talking about certain events—namely anything unpleasant. But I needed to know how far she went with Manuel Marchetti, and since he was indirectly connected to her horrible attack, and subsequently me, we’d be forced to go there.

I cleared my throat uncomfortably. “I’ve been thinking about... the past.”

Her brows arched. “Past?”

I looked down and brushed an imaginary speck of lint off my jean shorts. I always dressed down when meeting my mother, not wanting to attract any attention to myself.

“Yes, I’ve been thinking about that night those men attacked us and... and about that man who caught you lip-syncing. The man you were dating back then.”

“Why would you ask me about that after so many years?”

I placed my cup on the coffee table and tucked a piece of my hair behind my ear.

“Because it’s been on my mind.”

She frowned. “But why would that man be on your mind?”

I debated how to answer without revealing too much.

“Do you remember him?” I asked, watching her carefully.

Her expression turned slightly dreamy.

“Yes, Manuel Marchetti. Who could forget that man?” Then, as if remembering herself, she narrowed her gaze at me. “Why are you bringing him up?”

I shrugged, playing nonchalant. “I think I saw him in Paris.”

Not exactly a lie.

“Did he see you?”

“Yes.”

“Did he recognize you? Did you talk to him?” I really didn’t want to lie to her, but I knew what her reaction would be if I told her the whole truth.

“No.”

“You’re being very vague and short.”

“Sorry,” I muttered.

“Where did you see him?”

“Well, I went out with the girls and we got separated. Some men started harassing me and he stepped in, chasing them away.”

“That sounds like him. Always the gentleman.” Mom’s eyes narrowed slightly. “And he didn’t recognize you?”

“No.”

“You didn’t tell him who you were, did you?”

“There wasn’t much talking.” I wet my lips, recalling that night, before I gathered my wits about me and cleared my throat. “No, I didn’t tell him anything.”

Mom’s mouth curved and a dreamy sigh left her lips.

“I wish I could have taken that man to bed.” I released a breath I’d been holding since touching down in Spain. Relief unlike anything else filled me at the knowledge my mother hadn’t slept with Manuel Marchetti. I loved her, but that didn’t mean I felt comfortable sharing her lovers. “Love is painful. It tears you apart, but for him, I would have given it another try.”

Love tears you apart and shreds you into tiny little pieces. It was what she had always told me. She’d told me if it hurt, you could be sure you were in love. It was how I measured all my relationships—if they could be called that. I didn’t let myself get hurt, so I must have never been in love.

“Maybe it’s good that you haven’t,” I retorted wryly.

“The word is that he’s very well endowed and can fuck like—”

I gasped, flushing furiously. “Mother!”

She reached for my hand and squeezed it. “Oh, shush. It’s not like we’re virgins.”

I’d never come out and told my mother I’d lost my virginity, but she assumed. Her theory was that when five girls lived together, they usually did dumb things.

“You’re the most untraditional mother a girl could have,” I stated, shaking my head.

She leaned back into the seat with a sigh. “I try, Athena. I don’t want you stuck in a box.” A shudder rippled down my spine. Mom winced and quickly took my hand into hers, squeezing it tightly. “I don’t want you to be what’s expected, because men or society expect that from you.”

“I know,” I murmured, quickly pushing the dark thoughts away. I couldn’t think about those now. Or ever, especially not with my mother.

“Expectations were put on my sister. She was too scared to go against them, so she married Lykos Costello, and it cost her everything, including her sanity.”

I startled, shooting her a surprised look. “You rarely talk about your sister.”

She shrugged. “I was much younger than her and we weren’t alike. She was shy, religious, and so reserved.” My mother was definitely nothing like that. “I thought she’d turn into a nun. She didn’t. She married a Greek mobster and went crazy.”

My mouth dropped. “Mom... what are you saying? Is she alive?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know.” A shadow passed her expression. “I heard she was committed to a psych ward, but then there are other stories that claim she died.”

“Didn’t you call her husband?” I asked, bewildered. “Your brother-in-law.”

She shot me a baffled look. “Why would I? They cut ties with me, not the other way around.”

I shook my head, perplexed. “What happened that made your only sister, my aunt, cut ties with us?” She opened her mouth, then paused. I couldn’t understand all the secrecy. “I would think you’d want your sister in your life, Mom. After all, you two grew up together.”

“We did, but she always stole the spotlight.”

My brows furrowed. “What do you mean?”

She sighed with exasperation. “Everyone always loved her, and whenever she was around, I was the forgotten one. Then her marriage to the head of the Greek mafia was arranged, and she became unbearable. Nobody saw her flaws the way I did.”

Something about her comment left a sour taste in my mouth. I knew my mother had been hurt badly and, in turn, had hardened herself, but her sister had nothing to do with it.

“Well, nobody’s perfect,” I pointed out. “I mean, I’m not thrilled to pretend you aren’t my mother, but I deal with it. I’m certainly not shunning you, because I love you.”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes. “I told you it’s for our safety. I only insist on it because I love you.”

“I love you too, but it’d be nice if it wasn’t just the two of us.” She blinked, staring at me with an oblivious expression, and I explained. “Your sister is your family and so is her husband, their children. They are *our* family. Don’t you think it would have been nice for me to grow up with cousins?”

She shrugged. “My sister didn’t have children until much later. The age difference between you and your cousins is too big.” I rolled my eyes. She was missing my point. “Besides, you did meet your uncle.”

My brows furrowed. “I think I’d remember meeting my uncle.”

She paled slightly, then whispered, “Athena, he came to the hospital after... after the whole burning casket... incident.”

I froze as fear crept into the corners of my mind, crushing my windpipe. *That* I remembered vividly, although I wished I didn’t. My lungs tightened. The darkness from that day morphed into nightmares I’d re-live over and over again until I had to shove them all into a vault.

I hated how those memories could render me immobile so effortlessly. I was stronger than that, dammit. I fucking was.

“I don’t remember... him.” I curled my fingers, the nails digging into my palms. I couldn’t go there now. Not ever. I didn’t want to show my mom, or anyone, how badly the events eleven years ago had fucked me up. “Aren’t you worried about your sister?”

Mom shrugged. “We haven’t been on speaking terms for decades.” I narrowed my eyes and she shook her head. “I might have... made some mistakes.”

I waited for her to elaborate. Unsurprisingly, she didn't. In fact, I was surprised she was willing to share this much at all. But now that she'd opened the door, I intended to learn as much as I could about my lineage—with or without her help.

"You're human," I pointed out. "To be human is to make mistakes. Like I said, we all make them, so I'm sure your sister and her husband have long since forgiven you."

She sighed. "No, something like that they wouldn't forgive."

"Like what?"

She paused, pressing her lips together, her eyes searching mine. Whatever she saw in them had her sighing.

"You remember how we fled back to the States when you were twelve," she stated, abruptly changing subjects. There was a hint of fear in her voice that she was trying to tamp down, but I knew it too well. "After the attack by the Triads."

I winced at the memory of men barging into our little apartment in the middle of the night and hurting her, leaving her with bruises and unable to breathe. The men who almost burned me alive.

Don't think about that. Don't think about that.

It never ended well when I lowered my defenses. That day was shoved into a dark vault in my mind and sealed shut. It had to stay there.

"Because of the attack," I murmured, terror from long ago pinching my chest.

One corner of her mouth turned up.

"That attack was the result of my stupidity." Her gaze roamed over the room until it settled on the large window where the city of Seville bathed in the midday sun. "Our parents were part of the Greek mafia, running things for the Costello family in the States. Shortly after my sister, Amara, married Lykos, our parents died, and she brought me to Greece to live with her and my new brother-in-law. I was sixteen, naive, and stupid, and Lykos's world was so different from the way we'd grown up. Men were harsher but had such charisma and appeal, it was impossible to resist them."

My mom had told me many tales of my grandparents—both first-generation Greeks in the United States, making a life for themselves. However, she had never admitted to their involvement in the mafia. I started to wonder what else she was keeping from me.

“Is that when you met—” I swallowed a lump in my throat. She hated talking about my father, and while I couldn’t blame her, I wanted to know some of my history.

“Yes, that’s how I met your father, Atticus, about a year later.”

“How much older was he than you, Mom?”

A heartbeat passed before she answered, “Twenty years older.”

“A significant age gap,” I muttered, knowing full well it made me somewhat of a hypocrite. But there was one major difference between her scenario and mine—she was barely of age, and I was a grown woman.

“I was mature for my age,” she stated, confidence shimmering in her eyes. “I knew what I wanted, and I went after it.”

“So my father was... is... was”—I had no idea if he was alive or dead —“in the mafia?”

She smiled gently. The subject of my father had been off-limits for so long, it made me apprehensive to hear her talking so freely about it now. In fact, his first name was all I knew about him.

She gave a terse nod. “Sort of. He’s built himself quite an empire by now.” The present tense didn’t escape me. “He was making his way up the ranks then, and he sure as hell didn’t mind being ruthless if it meant coming out on top. I let myself get swept up in his charms, too blind to see that he was trying to use me to get to my brother-in-law.”

I took her cool hands between mine and squeezed in comfort. “You couldn’t have known.”

She smiled sadly. “But I think I did. He had a wife and children.” I stiffened, learning that I had half-siblings hurting more than it should. “He hinted at his unhappiness with them, but he never really said he’d leave them for me. I conjured it all up in my mind. Anyhow, Atticus wanted information on Lykos’s routes to smuggle his product. I was so stupid and in love, I got that information for him. I went behind Lykos and my sister’s backs, not knowing Atticus was involved in human trafficking.”

I gasped at all the revelations slamming into me. Everything my mother had shared seemed like it was too far-fetched to be true, but a father who was involved in human trafficking trumped it all.

“Needless to say, my brother-in-law was furious and kicked me out. That same day, I learned I was pregnant with you.” I swallowed a lump in my throat. “I was at a crossroads, and I knew, unless I did something drastic, we’d end up dead or worse.”

“What did you do?” My voice was barely a whisper.

“I knew Atticus stored large amounts of cash in his home in Athens. While he was away, tending to his *family*, I went to it. I found the cash and...”

“And?” I breathed in suspense.

She released a heavy sigh, then waved her hand. “Nothing. At the end of it all, I took enough cash to get me passage to America, and then I set fire to Atticus’s house. I burned it all to ash.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah, like I said, it was dumb. Who knew what he had stored at his Athens property, and I certainly wasn’t thinking too far ahead when I set it alight. Luckily, he had no photos of me—yet another red flag I should have seen—and he didn’t know about you, so I got us away safely.”

“Until we weren’t,” I whispered. “Safe,” I added, remembering that horrible night.

“Until we weren’t.”

TEN

MANUEL



I threw my jacket onto one of the tufted upholstered lounge chairs in my room and sat down on the edge of my bed, phone in hand, listening to Giovanni Agosti drone on about some issue with a supplier. I really wasn't in the mood to deal with more fuckups.

"One last thing," he said, sounding apprehensive all of a sudden. "Atticus Popov has been spotted roaming the Omertà territory here in Italy."

Why in the fuck did Atticus keep popping up everywhere?

"Has he attempted to reach out to our contacts?" I asked, squeezing the bridge of my nose.

"That's the bizarre part." Giovanni sounded weary. It would seem I wasn't the only one plagued by lack of sleep. "He hasn't. He inquired about a certain... performer."

I scoffed—of course he did. "Maybe his mistress?"

Atticus was known for keeping multiple women for his own pleasure. He certainly was a horny old man.

"Maybe. Although, who'd fuck that old fuck is beyond me."

"His wealth and name know no bounds," I muttered, closing my eyes in frustration. I was too tired for this shit. "Plenty of women go for that shit."

"Well, I don't think he was searching for a mistress."

"What makes you say that?"

"He inquired about a specific woman who performed at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma about ten, eleven years ago. He seemed curious about

whether she had a child with her.” Something nudged at the far corner of my mind, but before I could zero in on it, Giovanni continued. “The Triads must be following the idiot because they also showed up.”

The corners of my mouth tipped up. “I’m guessing you took care of them?”

Knowing Giovanni, he probably skinned them alive.

“I did, but I left a few for you.”

“How generous of you,” I deadpanned, reaching for my discarded jacket. “Drop me your location. I’ll be there in an hour. Don’t end them without me.”

“Don’t worry, we’ve had our fill. The last three are all yours.”

“We?”

“Ghost and me.”

I shouldn’t have been surprised. Ghost was the best tracker in the Omertà. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

As I made my way out of the house, I caught my reflection in the entryway mirror. My body was clear of tattoos with the exception of a single one on my back, a skull wrapped in thorns and roses. It was the Omertà tattoo, a testament to the training I’d gone through, its symbol of death, sacrifice, and vow a perfect depiction of its meaning.

All that work had inevitably changed me. I often dreamed of drowning in blood, of it filling my mouth and choking me. The dreams started back when I watched everyone I loved be killed off—my parents who I barely remembered, my brother, and Enrico’s brother.

It was the reason I never married. It was the reason for my lack of commitment. It was the reason I hadn’t started a family. I’d seen and tasted too much death, and it always came close, brushing against the ones I loved or taking them away.

So I settled for passing flings as I became stronger and more brutal. I’d gone through thick and thin with Enrico, having his back the same way he had mine. The gruesome tasks we’d performed had hardened both of us.

Torture and killing became second nature to me, work I learned to love. It earned me both respect and fear from my enemies. The things I needed to do in order to stay on top weighed on my soul, a vicious, never-ending cycle. Not that I believed my soul could be saved.

All this ensured the survival of the Marchetti name. That was what family meant to us: protect our own at all costs. But it did come at a cost—

front-row seat to death and lack of rest. Most nights, I slept three to four hours max.

Until the night I had *her*. The mysterious Athena. I hadn't slept that soundly in years.

One helicopter ride later, I walked inside the warehouse where Giovanni Agosti and Ghost casually played cornhole while three men hung off the ceiling. The metallic smell filled the space and my nostrils, the floor sticky under my leather shoes.

It wasn't the pool of blood all over the floor that surprised me, nor the men hanging off the ceiling, but rather the two grown men playing a game—an American game at that.

“Ma che cazzo?”

Both of them lifted their heads.

“Took you long enough,” Giovanni muttered. “I thought you took a trip around the world.”

I fought an eye roll—it had taken me two hours door to door, but I wasn't about to argue with him. “What are you doing?”

“Playing cornhole,” Ghost deadpanned. “We were bored.”

“I know what it is, but couldn't you have found an Italian game to play?”

They both snorted.

“We were born in the States,” Giovanni muttered. “Just because we're on Italian soil doesn't mean we can't enjoy football, baseball, *and* cornhole. Fucking sue us.”

“I wouldn't be too proud of that shit,” I retorted dryly.

“Don't start shit,” Ghost muttered. “We know you're offended because soccer is a girl's sport and football a man's.”

I scoffed.

“We Italians believe in the one true fútbol. You know, the thing you guys butcher and call soccer. It's not soccer.”

Ghost snorted. “Sounds like soccer to me.”

The three men who were still alive followed our exchange with wide eyes.

“Now, gentlemen, what do you think?” I asked, focusing on them as I tucked my hand into the pocket of my Brioni suit. “Soccer or fútbol?” Their eyes bulged, their mouths opening and closing like gaping fish. I flicked a look over my shoulder. “They speak English, no?”

Ghost shrugged. "They scream, I can tell you that much."

I shook my head, returning my attention to our prisoners. The tattoo—a symbol in the mouth of a skull—was etched on their skin, depicting the old alliance made by the Tijuana cartel, Albanians, and the Triads that still stood today.

Giovanni had one too, as well as the Omertà tattoo.

"They're all insane," one of the Triads' men mumbled in Chinese. My language skills were definitely paying off today.

"You have no idea," I answered in Chinese, smiling like the devil himself.

My heart pounded, my body alive after weeks of exhaustion. I let the darkness take over, welcoming the sensation. I needed to kill, to feel life draining out from under my blade, hear their cries as they begged for me to stop.

And so the torture started. As did their screams.

After an hour, two men lay crumpled on the stone floor at my feet, pools of red beneath them. They hadn't talked—but the third one would. I wanted to know why they were on my territory, what Atticus Popov was up to. Everything.

I smiled as I sat down in front of the last Triad soldier. Though he couldn't move, he jerked against his bindings, trying to get away from me while Giovanni and Ghost continued to play their ridiculous game.

I set my knife on my ruined suit pants, the silver blade now crimson, and the man followed the movement with terror in his eyes.

"Now, are you going to make this difficult like your colleagues"—I gestured to the lumps on the floor—"or will you answer my questions in exchange for a quick death?"

He swallowed hard and a bead of sweat rolled down his temple.

The Triads believed in honorable, quick deaths, even though their own methods of torture were quite brutal. It was the reason nobody ever wanted to work with them, at least nobody sane. Clearly, Atticus Popov wasn't sane or smart if he'd managed to get on the Triads' bad side.

"So," I continued when he didn't speak, "you'll give me some answers, sì?"

"I swore an oath."

"I don't want your organization's secrets," I drawled, hiding my fury. "I want them out of Omertà territory. Now, what I want to know is why you

are here and what your business is with Atticus Popov.”

He opened his mouth but no words came out. It would seem he needed an extra incentive.

I lunged forward to hold my knife against his throat. “If you have nothing to say, I can begin.”

“No, no, please.”

“I will peel the skin from your bones until you tell me what I wish to know. Then I’ll slice your belly open and pull out your intestines like a pig.”

The prisoner remained silent, terror shaking his body. At some point, he passed out, and Ghost brought over smelling salts, jolting him awake.

I sighed dramatically as I flicked a look at Giovanni and Ghost. “I really didn’t want to touch his balls, but it seems I’ll have to. Fetch the saw, will you, Giovanni? A dull one.”

The second he saw the metal blade, the man began speaking.

“Twenty-three years ago, Atticus screwed over the Triads,” he whimpered.

“Old news,” I deadpanned. “The entire underworld knows the story. He made a business arrangement with the Triads, Albanians, and the Tijuana cartel, smuggling flesh, then he turned around and fucked them over. He’s settled those debts since. Why the sudden interest again by the Triads?”

He let out a sardonic breath. “It wasn’t about the money for us. It was an eye for an eye.”

“Explain.”

“He took something priceless from the Triads. Eleven years ago, a score was settled. Or so we thought.” My brows furrowed. The Omertà had thought the same. “We were fooled. Now the woman will pay, and there’ll be no mistakes about it this time.”

“A woman?”

His lips thinned and I pressed the blade against his throat, cutting through the flesh.

He started crying. “An inside woman who helped him twenty-three years ago. Atticus’s mistress—a woman with connections to the Greek mafia.”

“Who?” It wouldn’t be Lykos’s wife. She was a devout Christian woman who insisted her husband’s organization ended all flesh trading.

When he remained silent, I shoved the blade against his balls and repeated, “Who?”

The words were slow and barely audible when he answered, “His sister-in-law.”

I shared a glance with Giovanni and Ghost, whose expressions portrayed equal parts surprise and shock.

“I didn’t know Lykos had a sister-in-law,” Giovanni stated in Italian. “There was never any mention of her.”

I returned my attention to my prisoner. “Do you have a name?”

His teeth chattered, but he managed to spit out the words. “Alexandra Maria Bottelli.”

I... I knew that name. I knew that woman. Yes, it had been over a decade since I’d seen her, but she wasn’t someone you easily forgot. A highly sought-after opera singer.

“You lie,” I gritted.

There was no fucking way that the opera singer was Lykos’s sister-in-law. I could admit that she was skilled when it came to deceiving a paying audience... but involved with Atticus? The Triads? I couldn’t see it.

“She’s the sister of Lykos’s wife,” he insisted, his words choppy. “She was Atticus’s mistress, and after Lykos kicked her out, she went crazy after learning Atticus wouldn’t leave his wife. She went to his house and ended up stealing some cash before setting Atticus’s house in Greece on fire.”

“And then Popov paid you that back, ten times over,” I pointed out.

“He couldn’t repay this,” he hissed. “Eye for an eye.”

I was getting tired of these vague responses.

“Why does eye for an eye matter now, over twenty years later? What did this mistress do?” He remained silent and I shoved the blade against his balls again. “I’m tired of repeating myself. What did she do?”

A heartbeat passed.

“That I will never tell.” His eyes met mine and resolve shone in them. Giovanni and Ghost stopped playing their game and gave the whole scene a long look. “But no matter what you do to me, it will be an eye for an eye for Atticus Popov and Alexandra Maria Kosta, because we know. *We. Know.*”

There were many things I could extract from my prisoners, but the unhinged look in the man’s eyes told me he was done.

So I took pity on him and put a bullet between his eyes.

It was time I paid a visit to the opera singer.

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ELEVEN

ATHENA



The window in my room was open, the city noise buzzing with life and stars glittering above. I always slept with curtains slightly open, needing to see the sky when I opened my eyes.

I shifted on the soft hotel bed, trying to get comfortable.

Speaking to my mother earlier had opened the floodgates to the memories I had put a tight lid on. The box seemed to close in on me, just like it had all those years ago. The darkness. The pain. The terror. *The fire.*

Every time I let my guard down, believing I'd escaped my nightmares, they came back with a vengeance. I started to think they'd forever be around, following and mocking me through life until there was no more life left in me. Maybe it was time I sought out a new therapist.

Keeping my gaze locked on the stars, I put a hand on my chest, tapping it lightly as if it'd release the pressure.

I considered what my old therapist used to tell me when I experienced overwhelming sensations. *To free yourself, you must face your demons; otherwise, you will never find peace.*

"Not tonight," I murmured under my breath, fluffing up my pillow, then shifting to the side.

Then I did something I hadn't done in years. I began humming a song, each soft vibration pushing me closer to a restless sleep.

Darkness.

I could feel the heat from the fire inching closer to my skin with each breath, yet I was cold. My nails scratched against the wood. An invisible

hand tightened around my neck.

“Please,” I tried to whisper but I couldn’t move my lips. “Mama, please save me.” But I couldn’t say a word. Tears blurred my vision. Snot ran down my nose. “Someone, please.”

I would die here... burn alive.

Then suddenly, a pair of hands grabbed me. They were gentle, unlike the men who shoved me into this box. Yet, I thrashed against him.

“Shhh, it’s okay. You’re safe. It’s okay.”

I forced my eyes open just as cold fingers pressed against my neck. The first thing I noticed were tattoos underneath his ash-smeared white shirt. But when I looked up at his face, I couldn’t distinguish his facial features. Everything looked hazy aside from stormy ice-blue eyes.

When he grabbed me by the neck, he hissed, “Breathe.” The order was clear and the frantic look in his eyes demanded I obeyed. “And don’t you dare stop.”

I took my first breath, oxygen expanding my lungs. Then another, and slowly, the tightness in my chest started to loosen up.

But I needed to know who this was. I had never seen him before. Why did he save me?

“I don’t want you wrapped up in this fucked-up mafia world, Athena Kosta.” His voice was surprisingly gentle. “I’ll ensure nobody can find you from now on.”

His words made no sense, but I still nodded as if they did.

I moved my lips. “Who are you?”

“One day you’ll learn, but for now, kiddo, you better stay alive.”

I awakened with a jolt, my breathing harsh and my nightgown damp from sweat as the memory of the night that started the nightmare lingered in the back of my mind. My eyes darted to the window, the bright colors splashed against the dark sky as dawn crept up.

My hand came to rest on my chest to ease my thundering heart as I pushed the memories back into the vault along with gratitude for the man who saved me and hatred for the man who’d caused my mother so much pain.



The visit with my mom was turning out to be different from past ones.

She'd never been this open to discussing things she'd previously kept from me. And still, I couldn't shake the feeling that there were more secrets she was keeping from me.

After my morning walk through Seville and a light breakfast at the local pastry shop with my standard Spanish treat of *café con leche*, I made my way back to the hotel.

I had a few more hours with Mom before catching my flight back to Paris.

Parked in front of the hotel was a dark, official-looking sedan with two stone-faced and *very* well-dressed men standing next to it.

I flicked a curious look their way as I approached. One had an off-putting, dark aura, but the other one was striking. My eyes locked on him, his muscled body wrapped in a sleek, three-piece suit. An easy smile played on his lips, his green eyes shining like he'd just heard a joke. As I let my eyes rake down his body, my attention was captured by a tattoo I hadn't seen in a very long time.

I stumbled, horrified as I began to topple over, heading face-first into the pavement. Time seemed to slow as the cobblestones inched closer and closer, until I felt strong arms catch me and set me on steady ground.

"Are you okay?" A set of green eyes eyed me warily, and my eyes fell to the tattoo again. A black symbol etched into the open mouth of a skull. The last time I'd seen a similar one, I was sprawled over my mother, crying and praying we'd live to see the sun rise.

"Yes, yes," I muttered, lost in my thoughts as I shook his hands off of me. Worried that my coffee would resurface, I bolted inside to safety. I had to get upstairs—had to get to my mom. After all these years, had they finally decided to come for us again? Why? How did they track us down?

Steeling my spine, I rushed through the lobby. Once inside the elevator, I frantically pressed the button for our floor, and as the door slowly closed, the last face I saw could've belonged to the devil himself. I brought a hand to my mouth and closed my eyes, shaking away the image of sunken cheekbones, green eyes, and dark, slanted brows.

It felt like an unstoppable ride to a certain death as I watched the floor number change, taking me higher and higher. *Come on, come on*, I thought as I curled my palms into fists and braced myself for the bell to ding and the doors to slide open.

Whatever happened, I wouldn't cower, I wouldn't beg.

Ding.

I swallowed and stepped out into the suite. It was empty.

Sighing, I kept my steps silent as I moved around the living room. It was then that voices registered, coming out of my mother's bedroom.

My palms sweating, I reached for the glass vase on the shelf and raised it, dread brewing in my belly.

"Atticus is looking for you." The voice was familiar, yet my brain refused to catalog it. "And so are the Triads. You need to tell me what you took, Alexandra."

"I have no clue what you're implying," my mother said, her voice tight and raspy. "You're looking good, Marchetti." I stiffened, recognition immediately sinking in. The voice was familiar because it belonged to *Manuel*. "I dare say even better than the last time I saw you."

"Cut the shit." Manuel sounded mad. Did he figure out who I was and use me to track down my mother? What the fuck was happening? "Your charms didn't work on me a decade ago, and they won't work on me today."

I sucked in a breath, careful to remain quiet as I tucked myself into a shadowy alcove.

She took a step closer to him, trailing her bright red painted fingernail over his impeccable suit. She was touching *him*. I looked away for a moment, fighting off the urge to tell my mother to get her paws off him.

"Don't be like that, Manuel," she purred in her seductive voice, her eyes sparkling with worship. The fact that she was touching him made my blood heat. "We could give this another go."

Manuel regarded her with indifference, his lip curling in distaste, and I fought a grin.

"Thank you, but I'll pass," he stated coldly.

"Your loss." The saltiness in her voice was unmistakable, clearly indicating my mother felt slighted. She flashed him a sickly-sweet smile, batting her cat-like eyes. "You should give in to your wants, Manuel. It's a lot more fun than being uptight."

"I want answers," he demanded. "You have no idea the shit you've landed yourself in..."

"How did you find me anyhow? Cassidy Tech led by Nico Morrelli assured me they could hide my footprint on the web and hide my identity."

Manuel's eyebrows rose in surprise. "And how can you afford such a luxury?"

"None of your business." Mom reached into her bra and, to my surprise, pulled out a cigarette. Since when did she smoke?

Manuel was unfazed. "You should demand a refund, because information on you is readily available."

She stiffened. "Just on me?"

Uncertainty laced through her voice and something about it sent a pang through my chest.

"Who else?" Manuel narrowed his eyes on her, dark enough I could feel the coldness on my skin and he wasn't even looking in my direction. "Whatever you got yourself into, it's not going to end well. The people who are after you—Christ, Alexandra... The Triads are not a group to mess with."

Mom got herself together, her tone suddenly steady and almost bored. "Again, I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Don't play coy with me." There was a silence for a few beats. "What did you do to them?"

"Why don't you tell me what *you* know, and I'll let you know if you're on the right track. Otherwise, I can't see how any of this is *your* business."

"It's my business when the Triads linger in my territory, asking questions about you. And it's my business when Atticus Popov is roaming the continent, looking for you."

So that was my father's full name. *Atticus Popov*. Maybe I wouldn't need to do my own digging after all, as long as my mother kept Manuel talking.

"Atticus who?" Mother asked, managing to sound curious.

I suppressed a sigh. *Really, Mom?*

"Your ex-lover," Manuel deadpanned. "Stop acting. You're terrible at it and a horrible liar."

There was a long pause before my mother spoke again. "Fine, yes. Atticus was my first lover, but I have nothing to do with him now. I haven't seen him or spoken to him in over twenty-three years, and I don't intend to."

"Maybe you don't, but whatever you've done, the Triads want to settle the score. I suspect no amount of protection from Emiliano or his guards will keep you safe. Not to mention everyone you love."

I heard footsteps and rushed into my room, hiding behind the door, clutching the vase against my heaving chest.

This had only opened the door to more secrets—possibly lethal ones—that my mother was keeping from me.

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TWELVE

MANUEL



Two days later, I was in my office in Paris.

The visit to Alexandra was fruitless. The woman refused to share anything, her lips shut tightly—whether from fear or stubbornness, I didn’t know. One thing I did know: whatever the secret she was keeping, it was huge.

I rubbed my eyes behind my glasses. The words on the screen were fuzzy, my body was tired, and my mind was too chaotic to focus.

Sighing, I picked up my tumbler of grappa. I’d have preferred something stronger, but I needed to finish going through my spreadsheet before I could afford falling into a drunken stupor. Weeks of sleepless nights had slowly begun to take their toll on me.

A sharp knock sounded on my office door and I looked up from my laptop to see my nephew grinning like a fool. Of course he was happy, tomorrow he was tying the knot. He’d found his match in the mysterious violinist, Isla Evans, and I hadn’t seen his smile slip in weeks.

I, on the other hand, was still searching for mine. Athena was nowhere to be found—not for a lack of trying.

“You’re getting grumpy in your old age,” Enrico remarked as he took the seat opposite of me.

“And you’re getting annoying in yours,” I deadpanned. “Better knock that shit out or Isla will run the other way tomorrow.”

I drummed my fingers on the desk and sipped my drink, my thoughts drifting to white dresses and long auburn hair. I needed to get a grip.

He tilted his chin toward my laptop. "Are you busy?"

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "No, I'm just staring at my laptop for the fun of it."

"Cristo, you're really cranky, zio mio."

I narrowed my eyes, almost tempted to smack that satisfied grin off his face. Instead, I leaned back into my chair, studying him. Isla, his bride-to-be, was significantly younger than Enrico, but I could tell she'd be good for him. She was already ruffling his feathers.

"You ready to be a married man?" I asked.

"Can't wait. She's stuck with me now." He grinned, his eyes darting to the window. I had never seen him this settled before.

"Pussy-whipped," I muttered under my breath, reaching for a pen. "Did you come here with a purpose or do you need me to calm your fluttering heart?"

He flipped me a bird. "Vaffanculo."

I snorted. "Some of us have real work to do."

His eyes flitted to my laptop, then back up. "What are you working on?"

"Harvest, wine, and olive numbers from Tivona and Tuscany." The Marchetti empire was going strong, but I enjoyed building businesses from scratch and seeing them flourish. Over the past twenty years, I'd built an empire of my own, independent of the Thorns of Omertà. I was born into the criminal world and more than likely I'd die in it, but I'd leave a *legitimate* legacy behind too. "And I have architectural designs to review for the Amalfi project."

Enrico nodded. He understood the need not to be consumed solely by the Omertà. After all, before his brother died, he wanted nothing to do with this world.

"I need a favor." Now that got my attention. He never asked for anything. "Isla is very close with her friends." I waited for him to continue as he handed me a piece of paper. "After church tomorrow, can you go to this address, pick up the girls—you'll recognize them, they'll be wearing bridesmaid dresses—and then bring them over for our wedding dinner?"

"How many girls?"

"Four. Two of them are Romero's girls."

"Enzo and Amadeo will be in heaven tomorrow," I remarked dryly. "Surrounded by beautiful women. It's a dream come true for any teenage boy." We both snickered, but I didn't miss the satisfied smile playing

around his mouth. “Isla will be good for them.” He nodded, a pensive expression lingering in his eyes. “Will you tell her the truth?”

The truth was related to our family, and only a handful of us knew about it. It would be dangerous for all of us—especially the boys—if that secret was exposed.

“Yes, I want her to understand.”

I nodded. “It’s the only way to start a marriage.”

A good marriage anyhow.

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THIRTEEN

ATHENA



Crossing paths with Manuel Marchetti might have been dangerous, but I wasn't complaining. He'd inspired my creativity and I planned to milk that for all it was worth.

The conversation I'd overheard between him and my mother had been running on a loop for the past three days. When I'd asked my mother about her morning, she flat-out lied, stating she'd had a spa treatment while I was out on my walk.

So, I took it upon myself to do some research. I looked up the Triads, and what I learned turned my blood cold. They were known as one of the most ruthless mafia organizations in the world. Why would they be looking for my mother? The Google search had only resulted in more questions.

And then I caved and looked up Atticus Popov. A businessman with mile-long allegations of corruption. There were many pictures of him—from the time he was young to what seemed as recent as this year. The man definitely didn't shy away from the attention. As I flipped through them, I saw similar features, albeit different color eyes. A patrician nose. Arrogant smile. His son, Danil, was handsome, much like his father, but there was something in his icy blue eyes and blank expression that set my teeth on edge.

There were barely any photos of Atticus with his children and his deceased wife, but there were many with models, actresses, and what I imagined were escorts.

I went back to the photograph of Danil and Nicki Popov—my half-siblings, *something I was still reeling over*—and as I studied them, I felt... nothing. Zip. Nada. Was that normal?

I closed my eyes while invisible cold fingers wrapped around my throat and cut off my breath. The world spun so fast I feared I was going to be sick and a tear escaped my closed lids, running down my cheek.

I couldn't understand this reaction. Maybe the vault in which I buried a lot of my fears was finally failing. Or maybe I wasn't as unaffected by the revelation of my newfound siblings as I tried to convince myself.

"That doesn't change anything," I muttered under my breath, although I didn't think I was convincing even myself.

With a shake of my head, I returned to the open file on my laptop and double-clicked. The only way my brain could shut down all the what-if scenarios surrounding recent events was by losing myself to my writing.

I was hours into plotting my next novel when a sharp knock sounded at the door. I ignored it, waiting for one of the girls to answer as I furiously typed on my laptop, words flowing from my fingertips like never before. I was convinced it had everything to do with the man I'd spent the night with several weeks ago.

Another knock on the door and I let out an exasperated breath.

"The door," I yelled. Nothing, all the girls still hiding in their rooms.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

I sighed and sprung to my feet, placing my laptop on the sofa, then padded toward the front door as I muttered under my breath. "It's like I'm living with—"

I froze with the door half-opened, coming face-to-face with the man I thought I'd never see again but somehow couldn't stop running into.

I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, then opened them, hoping I was hallucinating. But there he was. Panic exploded inside my chest while those lips that were capable of doing downright sinful things curved into a smile.

"Athena," he purred. "How lovely to see you."

Shit. How did he find me?

When I finally found my voice, it came out in a whisper. "Wh-what... what are you doing here?"

"I came for you, *amorina*."

I couldn't decide whether I should laugh or cry.

“Well, I don’t want to see you,” I snapped, but before I could slam the door in his face, his foot blocked it. My eyes lowered to his expensive Oxfords before returning to his face.

“Now don’t be like that.” Fuck, his accent sent my core throbbing. “I’m so happy to see you.”

“I wish I could say the same,” I mumbled, glancing over my shoulder, suddenly glad none of the girls had left their rooms. “You have to go.”

Manuel regarded me with his jaw pressed tight, the veins in his neck pulsing rapidly, and he shook his head.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he drawled, his dark eyes gleaming sinfully. Or was it furiously? I couldn’t tell.

“Yes, you are,” I gritted.

“No, I’m not, *amorina*. Now that I’ve finally found you again, I want a little repeat of our last encounter.”

I let out a strangled laugh. “You’re nuts. Hot as fuck, but crazy.”

“Crazy for something.” His voice was a perfect combination of rough and soft, so composed and accented that it melted the tension from me.

Until I remembered his visit to my mother only a few days ago. I moved to push the door closed again.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“Just turn around and go or I’ll scream.”

A smile lifted his lips—plump, glorious, and so smug. He took another step and wrapped a hand around my waist.

“Nothing would make me happier. To hear you scream for me, just like the last time.”

Heat crawled to my cheeks. He pulled me into the hallway and my gaze flicked to him as we stood chest to chest. Heartbeat to heartbeat. My shorts and green tank top to his black Brioni suit.

If I was smart, I would have yelled out for my friends, but it would seem I was a glutton for punishment, because I remained silent as a church mouse.

“Are... are you stalking me?” I tried to twist free from his grip and step back.

I’d done research on Manuel Marchetti, learning of his connection to Enrico Marchetti and the Marchetti fashion house, but the speculations of the family’s involvement in the criminal underworld was what worried me. After the recent revelation about my heritage, I thought it best to keep my

distance, but it would seem destiny had plans of its own, bringing Manuel Marchetti to my door.

“Not well enough,” he said, his eyes glittering like black diamonds.

We breathed each other’s air before he leaned in and ran his lips down my throat. His scruff tickled my soft skin as he trailed his mouth down my neck and past my collarbone. In the far corner of my mind, I heard a soft click of the door, but I was too far gone to realize he’d led me further down the hallway.

“Manuel, I...” He pressed his face into my breasts, and I sighed. “I only do one-night stands,” I lied.

I felt him smile against my skin. “Then why are you touching me like your life depends on it?”

He was right—my hands were running down his chest, around his back, while he palmed my ass. I didn’t stop. My body was acting of its own volition.

“It’s just—” I moaned as he cupped me between my legs and my body arched into his touch. My breasts tingled as he ran his tongue across my nipple over the fabric of my shirt. “It’s just physical.”

He ran a thumb across the goose bumps on my arm and chuckled. “You can lie to yourself, but not to me.”

His presence cornered me against the wall and his wide shoulders blocked the view of anyone who might potentially stumble upon us. But it was his cologne that was intoxicating, his dark gaze pulling me into oblivion.

I inhaled slowly. Released it.

I couldn’t fall under his spell. I had to keep my wits about me. “How did you find me?”

“You first,” he murmured, resting his thigh between my legs and grinning as my traitorous body ground against it. “Why did you leave my bed?”

Telling him the truth was out of the question.

“I told you,” I breathed, the feel of his leg beneath me making it difficult to form words. “I just wanted you for one night.”

The lie hung thick and heavy in the air.

“You and I both know that wasn’t the last of it.”

He braced a hand on the wall above me, crowding me. I couldn’t think like this.

“My turn,” I said, subtly pressing him away. “How did you find me?”

“I didn’t,” he said softly, his grin turning wolfish. “Turns out, *your* friend Isla is marrying my nephew. I’m here to fetch her friends.”

And then it clicked—Isla’s hot Italian daddy was Enrico Marchetti.

Oh. My. God.

This world was too fucking small.

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FOURTEEN MANUEL



The world was a small place indeed.

I hadn't expected to find Athena on the list of friends I was sent to chauffeur.

Of course, if I hadn't missed Reina Romero's show, I probably would have been less surprised. And come to think of it, some of these girls looked very similar to the ones Athena had been laughing and dancing with that fateful night.

My gaze was focused on the road as the girls chatted in the back seat. Amadeo sat next to me, grinning like a fool, smashed between four women in variations of pink and lace, while Enzo opted to keep some dignity and sit in the passenger's seat.

It took the women almost a whole hour to get ready, drawing Enzo and Amadeo out of the car and up to the apartment to see what was taking so long. The three of us ended up sitting in the small living room, watching the commotion of women as they all scrambled to use one bathroom to make themselves presentable.

It was a good thing Enrico sent the dresses for the four women or they would have taken days to get ready.

Of course, Isla's sudden wedding was a surprise to all of them, but they must have at least known about Enrico because I kept hearing them mumbling jokes about a "hot Italian daddy." However, it was apparent nobody knew about Athena's little hookup with me, and I was happy to keep it that way.

There were a lot of oohs and aahs, but Athena kept mostly quiet, inserting a word or two occasionally, barely maintaining her composure with the frozen smile on her face while her gaze flicked to me every so often.

I couldn't keep the smug smile off my own face.

While I waited for the girls to get ready, I sent Ghost a message and was eager to hear back from him. I was sure he'd come back to me with everything on my little escape artist. In the meantime, I'd do some of my own research as well.

I darted a glance to the rearview mirror to find her eyes already on me and smirked as she averted her gaze.

I'm going to have fun playing with you, amorina.



We celebrated Enrico and Isla's wedding intimately—to no one's surprise.

Bouquets of red and white roses were scattered across each table. The dining room of Enrico's home had been transformed for the reception. The crystals in the chandelier glimmered, throwing a soft glow around the room. Candles set off a romantic mood in the atmosphere, making the space feel cozy and comfortable.

It was clear to everyone how close the girls were. They seemed to move in unison as they danced with abandon—carefree like only women in their early twenties could be. Christ, nothing made me feel older.

I caught Athena's eyes on me, but once again, she looked away. She was stubborn as fuck, but she didn't know that her stubbornness was no match for mine.

I'd looked up information on Athena Kosta, and much to my surprise, there wasn't much that came up. Parents' names: unknown. Date of birth: unknown. Family: unknown. It almost looked like her identity and footprint on the web had been wiped.

"What do we know about Isla's friends? I assume you ran a background check on all of them," I asked Enrico.

He shrugged. "Aside from the Romero girls, not much. I know they've been friends for years, and knowing Illias Konstantin and his brotherly overbearing skills, he must have had them all cleared."

That made sense. The Russian Pakhan had always been protective of his family.

My gaze flicked to Enrico who grabbed a glass vase, then extended a hand to his bride who watched him suspiciously.

“It’s time to break the glass,” I explained. “For *buona fortuna*.”

By the expression on Isla’s face—and her friends’—they had no idea about Italian customs.

“For good luck,” Enrico clarified. “The number of broken pieces will represent the number of years we’ll be happily married.”

Isla snickered softly, her little button nose scrunching. “Well, by all means. You’re gonna need all the luck you can get.”

Athena laughed, then as if she caught herself, she stopped. Enrico and Isla made their way to the corner of the room, everyone following them, but Athena and I lingered behind.

“Stop looking at me,” she hissed under her breath, her eyes trained on her friends. “Someone will see.”

I brought my hand around her waist, smiling.

“See what?” She rolled her eyes but refused to take the bait. I bent my head, pausing right at her earlobe before whispering, “You might as well let them see, because soon the whole world will know you’re mine.”

With each passing moment, the mystery surrounding her appealed to me more.

Her eyes widened. “Jesus, are all Italians crazy?”

“No, just us Marchettis.”

Before she could say anything else, Isla’s voice traveled through the room.

“I hope you know, I won’t be cleaning this up.” I chuckled, so ready to see Isla wreak havoc on Enrico’s life.

“It’s your wedding day. You’re not expected to clean or cook today,” Enrico explained.

Isla rolled her eyes. “Or ever.”

“How about you, Athena? Do you cook?” Not that it mattered, but I wanted to know more about her.

She turned to face me. “I don’t cook or clean either. And I spend a lot of money.”

I leaned over, brushing my mouth over her cheek. “Don’t worry, *amorina*, you won’t have to do any of that. And I have plenty of money for

you to spend.”

“Trouble always finds me. In more ways than one.”

It was a peculiar comment to make, but I wouldn’t let anything deter me.

“I’ll always get you out of trouble,” I retorted. “Enjoy today, because tomorrow, my courtship starts.”

“Did you bump your head and decide to go all Mark Darcy on me?” Athena scoffed.

“I don’t know who that is, but he better not show his face around me.”

She rolled her eyes. “It’s a movie character.”

I smirked, pleased it wasn’t a real person. “Well, then he might live to see another day.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Does it look like I am?” I ran my tongue across my teeth, though the tension in my body demanded I corner this woman so I could have my way with her. “I’m going to fuck the memory of every other man—fictional or not—out of your mind until you’re so obsessed with me, you’ll never leave my bed again. Not willingly, anyhow.”

Athena opened her mouth just as a glass was sent shattering across the marble floor. She took the opportunity to move away from me, leaving whatever she was going to say in the lurch.

It didn’t matter, though. I was a man on a mission. And despite how hard she worked to hide it, I could see the fire in Athena’s eyes.



Seated behind my desk, I conducted business while the moon glimmered high over Paris.

My cell phone buzzed with a message from Ghost and I slid it open.

Air whooshed out of my lungs as my eyes scanned over the information. With each read word, realization hit me in the chest like a hammer.

How was that possible?

My shock vibrated through every fiber of me. I wasn’t shocked often anymore, but this... I wasn’t expecting *this*.

Alexandra Bottelli’s child.

The woman I had dated once upon a time. The woman who I learned didn't mind using anyone or anything to get what she wanted.

I hadn't forgotten her; she was definitely a lesson worth remembering—not in a good way either. But her mother's identity wasn't even the worst part. It was her father's name that had the world tilting on its axis. Suddenly, so many things made sense.

No fucking wonder the Triads and Atticus were roaming the Omertà territory.

Granted, Paris wasn't our territory, but we had an alliance with the Corsican mafia, both of us strictly against certain trades, the main one being flesh trading.

Slowly, my shock was replaced by anger that lashed at my insides like a whip. Maybe Athena knew and was playing me on her mother's instruction.

I would find out, but if that was true, my little *amorina* had made a grave mistake. She had waded into a den of lions without the slightest protection, leaving herself vulnerable.

I quickly typed my thanks to Kingston—the Omertà's ghost—then grabbed my jacket from the back of the chair.

It was time I paid a certain woman a visit.

FIFTEEN

ATHENA



I flicked a glance down the hallway of the little apartment I shared with the girls—minus Isla now. They were all fast asleep, battling their own dreams and nightmares, while I sat in the living room with the TV flipped on to a French soap opera.

I watched it mindlessly while thoughts raced through my mind. My mother's admissions. The conversation I overheard in Spain. The father I hoped I'd never see. Secrets I sensed were still lurking.

The silence that filled the apartment and the memories that haunted me were so loud it hurt my ears. I liked my life and loved my friends, but the fear from that night eleven years ago had been unlocked and I didn't know where to go from here.

I hated this feeling. It made me feel like a terrified little girl all over again.

After hours of flipping through the channels, I finally gave up, got to my feet, and headed to my bedroom. On my way, I passed Raven's room, her soft snores curving my lips into a smile. Phoenix's room was silent as always, and Reina's restless footsteps indicated she was pacing around, probably trying to come up with a way to avoid her engagement to Dante Leone.

Wearing only an oversized T-shirt, I slipped into my bedroom, followed by my own personal demons, and crawled into bed. The windows were open, cool air filtering in and raising the hair on my arms.

My heart beat with a speed that confused me. I didn't know whether a certain hot Italian was to blame or if it was something else entirely. As the city soundscape slowly lulled me to sleep, I somehow knew that life was about to change.



I woke up curled into myself and clutching blankets while the smoky masculine scent registered through the fog. It took only a few seconds for my brain to place it.

He's here.

My eyelids fluttered open, my sight not yet adjusted to the darkness. I couldn't discern between the general shapes of the furniture and the shadows stretching up along the walls. No movement. No sounds, other than my soft breaths. Nothing.

And just as I started to suspect that maybe it was all in my head, I heard, "I told you my courtship would start today."

I let his words sink in, absorbing the vibrations of his tone. His voice did things to me that I had no business feeling for someone who was potentially connected to my dark past.

I didn't move, but my mouth seemed incapable of remaining shut. "You shouldn't sneak into my room. It's called trespassing. You might not have it in Italy, but here in France, it's a serious offense."

"I thought you might like the company, *amorina*."

I shifted onto my elbow and narrowed my eyes. There he sat, on the chair in front of my vanity, facing me, his ankle resting on his knee.

"You have some serious issues, you know that?"

His presence stirred every single atom in the air around me, and my body and mind were so attuned to him, I could practically feel him as if he were touching me.

When he remained silent, I added, "I'm definitely going to think twice the next time I meet a strange man in a bar and let him take me home."

"I didn't take you home," he pointed out.

My voice was dry as gin. "Fine, take me to bed."

"There won't be any of that, Athena." The way he said my name made my cheeks flush.

There was something different in the tone. That playfulness from earlier was gone, giving way to darkness.

The lamp on the vanity clicked on, partially illuminating his imposing frame. Shadows fell onto his face, giving me a glimpse of his tightly pressed lips, somewhat obscured by the dark stubble covering his jaw.

“You haven’t been honest with me,” he said, a storm brewing in his tone. My heart palpitated for several seconds, causing tightness in my chest and throat.

He knows.

I tried desperately to hold on to my cool, but I felt myself clutching at straws. How was I going to get out of this? If I shouted, would the girls wake up and come running?

“I—I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I choked out.

He tilted his head to the side, the silver at his temples catching the light. The man was more handsome than any other man I had ever met, but the power and darkness that rolled off his taut frame was what defined him.

Time was a peculiar thing. Weeks, days, *years* had gone by and I thought I’d forgotten the man, but in a faraway corner of my brain, he’d always been there.

“But I think you do,” he drawled. Anxiety squeezed my chest and a corner of his lips tilted up, making the lines on his face more prominent. “I think you know exactly what I’m talking about, Athena Kosta, the only daughter to Alexandra Maria Kosta and Atticus Popov.”

SIXTEEN MANUEL



I was furious when the first piece of information came in—there was no disputing that fact.

Athena Kosta, daughter to Alexandra Bottelli, born Kosta, and Atticus Popov.

Cazzo, I felt played. Betrayed. She wasn't the person I believed her to be.

Ghost was able to trace Athena to Alexandra Kosta and Atticus Popov. We all knew who Atticus was, but he dug further into Alexandra Kosta. It turned out, the woman had a stage name—Bottelli. Somewhere along the way, Alexandra had legally changed her last name to her stage name.

Cassidy Tech had been wiping any and all information on Athena from around the time she turned twelve. Before that, there were sporadic wipes of identity. I couldn't see Alexandra being the one arranging it, so it had to be her father.

My chest heaved as I read message after message pouring in from Ghost. Thoughts twisted into something sinister and cruel. I'd come here to punish her, but all it took was one look at that innocent face for my anger to crumble. Still I stayed—I had to get some answers.

So, I sat silently and watched her expression take on different shapes as she realized I knew who she was. Shock, fear, calculation... desperation, maybe?

"Are you working with your mother?"

“No.” Her voice was sincere, meeting my eyes. “Although I’m not sure what you mean by *working*. Am I her assistant? No. Am I in the same industry as her? No. Did I go out of my way to meet you on her request? Also no. In fact, it was the reason I left the morning after. I spilled the contents of your wallet and saw your name.”

“So you know who I am?”

She rolled her eyes. “I remember you.”

My brows furrowed. “How? We’ve never met.”

Alexandra never let on that she had a child, and I certainly never met Athena during the brief time I went out with Alexandra.

She shrugged. “We didn’t. I’d peek out of the window whenever you picked Mom up for your dates.”

The tone of her voice was icy, and I raised my brow.

“Are you jealous?”

She blew a frustrated breath.

“Not in the slightest. I’m not my mother.” Her lips flattened, like she regretted admitting that truth. “Why are you here, Manuel? Clearly, you’re pissed off to learn of my parentage, so why not just ignore me?”

Cazzo, I love her mouth. I liked her boldness and outspokenness. It was rare to see it in the women that usually surrounded me.

Anticipation tightened my muscles along with something else that I wasn’t ready to put a label on.

“I’m glad to hear you’re not Alexandra,” I said, ignoring her latter part of the statement. “We can’t pick our parents, *amorina*, so I can’t exactly hold that against you, can I?”

She opened her mouth to speak when a distant gunshot suddenly rang out, reaching us through her open window.

My heart sped up, fear spiking hard and fast. I didn’t think; I just reacted on instinct. I lunged across the room and pulled her off the bed, using my body to soften her fall.

“Stay still,” I whispered against her ear as her body shook against me. I kept my eyes trained on the window as I reached for my gun.

She exhaled a deep breath, seeming to resign herself to her fate, and I wondered if she thought I’d let her die. *Fucking never*. An unexplained urge to protect her shot through me, and suddenly I knew that I’d lay down my life for Athena.

Was it possible to feel something so strong in such a short time?

The answer was in my arms.

I cupped her face and watched as her eyes darted to the gun in my other hand. She tried to wriggle out of my hold, her expression desperate and terrified.

“Don’t be scared,” I growled, twisting a silencer on the barrel of my gun. “No one will hurt you.”

And then everything happened very quickly. A shadow appeared in front of the window and I fired. The first man fell back as another reached the windowsill. I fired again and put a bullet in his skull.

Dragging Athena with me, sheltering her with my body, I shifted to the other side of the bed, pressing my back against the wall.

Her whimper had me shooting my gaze up as a third attacker aimed his gun at me. He must have had a silencer on too because we didn’t hear the bullet fire. Athena shoved me out of the way and jerked. Her lips parted in a silent cry, and for a moment, the world stilled.

Cazzo.

My heart rate tripled as my reflexes jolted into motion, shooting blindly. The man fell through the open window and spilled onto the ground.

“What was that?” I recognized Raven’s voice.

“N-nothing,” Athena called out, her eyes wide as blood soaked her shirt. “I dropped a vase.”

“Jesus, Athena. It’s the middle of the night. You can reorganize your room tomorrow.”

I wrenched her closer, searching frantically for a wound. Terror gripped its cold fingers around my throat with each second that I couldn’t find it.

“Where is it?” I rasped, my eyes burning in a way they hadn’t in years as I held her in my arms. “*Cazzo*, where did the bullet go?”

She glanced behind me and I followed her gaze to the bullet that was lodged into the wall. I swallowed, taking a calming breath, before I finally saw it. It grazed her arm, and the blood was dripping onto her shirt. *Surface wound*, I thought, squeezing my eyes closed and sighing.

I stroked the hair back from her forehead, her ashen face and green eyes staring at me. I whispered words in Italian, ones that had often brought me comfort, hoping to soothe her.

She pressed her face into my chest, rocking against me.

“Don’t let them bury me,” she whispered over and over again. “Please, don’t let them.”

Taken aback by her words, I kissed her head and rubbed her back. There was something about her terror that gutted me to my core.

“You’ll be okay,” I murmured, bending low over her pale face. “I’ll take care of you.”

She blinked, then nodded. “Thank you.”

I didn’t deserve her thanks. I failed to protect her. *Madre di Cristo*. I recited every single curse in my mind.

As I held her in my arms, a single thought occurred to me: I would do anything to protect this woman.

And there was no coming back from it.

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SEVENTEEN

ATHENA



I had no idea how much time had passed. One minute it was just the two of us, and the next, men dressed all in black waltzed in through my window, clearing my room of any evidence—bodies, blood, bullets—of what had transpired. I sat against my headboard, watching in awe as they worked in total silence. Literally—not a sound came from them. They were obviously professionals, but I couldn't help cringing thinking about how many crime scenes they'd had to work in order to become so skilled.

Leaving his men to do their work, Manuel snuck me into the bathroom and cleaned out my wound, then helped me out of my blood-soaked pajamas. He worked carefully and with an intensity I couldn't describe.

Once back in the room, he tucked me into my bed and sat by my side.

"Leave the curtain partly open," I mumbled.

He frowned but didn't question it, opening them to give me an unobstructed view of my freedom. Did it make sense? No. But it was what I needed to feel safe.

"*Bene?*" he asked. "Better?"

"Yes, thank you," I rasped, pressing a hand to my chest. I had to release some of this pressure or I'd suffocate.

"Breathe, *amorina*," he instructed. "Nobody will hurt you." He took my hand off my chest and put it over his heart. I focused on his heartbeats and followed with my own. "That's right. Breathe in. Breathe out."

Eventually, my terror eased and oxygen came easier.

“Are you okay?” I startled at Manuel’s voice and found him studying me with a frown.

“Am I okay?” A strangled laugh, bordering on hysterical, escaped me. “Am I *okay*?” He shifted me so I was sitting on his lap. “No, I’m not okay. What the fuck was that?”

“The Triads.”

A tremor rolled through me. It had taken eleven years to convince myself what had happened was a one-off. It took all of thirty minutes for that bubble to burst.

“Are *you* okay?” I croaked, my eyes roaming over him.

“Yes,” he gritted out. “But never—” He cupped my cheeks firmly, his eyes boring into mine. “Fucking never put yourself in harm’s way for me.”

It was my turn to study him, even as fatigue threatened to claim me.

“I didn’t,” I told him calmly as I lifted my arm. “See? Just a graze. Yours would have been a bullet in the heart.”

He snarled. “Don’t placate me. If something like this ever happens again, you hide immediately and let me handle the fuckers.”

I clutched his arm, trying not to think about how good it felt to touch him, his warmth surrounding me after weeks of trying to hold on to the memory of him.

“Okay,” I snapped, finding my own courage. “Then *you* cannot put yourself in harm’s way for me.”

“No,” he replied hoarsely. “It’s for me to protect you, not the other way around.” I glared at him and the corner of his mouth hitched as if he was entertained. “You can’t stay here, *amorina*.”

My lips twisted.

“I’m not leaving,” I said stubbornly, although deep down I knew it was reckless. “And you can’t stay here because in another few hours the girls will wake up and I don’t want to explain”—I moved my hand from him to me and back to him—“this.”

His lips twisted. “I don’t give a shit what your girlfriends think. You’ll be staying with me from now on.”

The absolute nerve.

“No.”

“Yes. I’m not leaving you vulnerable and alone.”

I looked up to the ceiling and prayed for patience. *God, save me from stubborn, hot Italian men.* I needed him to be gone like yesterday. I worried

I'd cave. Being close to him, smelling him... It was a recipe for disaster.

"I swear to God, Manuel, you better go or I'll... I'll..." I must have been more tired than I thought because my mind refused to conjure a threat.

He smiled and tucked me inside the blankets and arranged my pillows. Then he kicked off his expensive Italian shoes and discarded his suit jacket before finally lying down on top of the blanket, his hands folded behind his head.

"You can do whatever you want to me. Tomorrow. Now go to sleep."



"Amorina."

I tossed and turned on my bed, my head feeling heavy. I gasped, grinding against something, and a moan vibrated through the air. My eyes snapped open and I found myself on my back, slightly disoriented. I blinked several times, finally understanding that Manuel's head was buried between my thighs.

"What—" My hoarse voice had him lifting his head, grinning as his face glistened. A shiver rolled down my spine as air clashed against my bare pussy. My T-shirt was still on but my panties were gone.

"Buon giorno," he murmured, and lowered his head between my thighs again, his eyes locked on me. Goose bumps scattered over my skin at the look in his gaze, hungry and feral. "I found my favorite way to wake you up."

His Italian accent was so thick it took several moments for the words to register. I was filled with a strange energy that traced its fingers along my nerve endings, waking my body in a way only he had ever done.

His fingers traced a path to my clit, the sensitive bundle of nerves swollen with need, then he licked me all the way to my forbidden hole. "Oh... Oh... God."

He took me by the hips in a ruthless grip and lifted my ass as he plunged his tongue inside my pussy. My lips opened, but before a hoarse scream could pierce the silence, his hand covered my mouth and muffled my cries of pleasure.

I threaded my hands through his hair, arching my back, and he groaned against my core.

“Unless you’re willing to sign their death warrant, another human is not allowed to hear your screams of pleasure,” Manuel said, and I shuddered at my recklessness.

My heart thundered as his large hand spread my thighs wider. My breaths spilled from my lips in frantic bursts as he ate me like he was starving, his tongue spearing into my opening and wringing a gasp from me.

“Manuel, please...”

He took my clit between his teeth, and my hips bucked against his mouth, grinding shamelessly.

“Mine,” he growled against my skin.

His lips found my folds, teasing and gentle, then suddenly his tongue slid in hard and fast, and I covered my mouth with my palm, stifling my gasps and cries.

My orgasm barreled closer and I thrust my fingers into his hair, tugging to get him where I needed him the most. With one final flick of his tongue, he moved up and latched on

to my clit, sucking it between his lips, his fingers now thrusting in and out of me.

My muscles clamped down around his thick fingers, and I cried out as my climax hit. My pussy clenched around his fingers and my clit pulsed against each lash of Manuel’s expert tongue.

As the orgasm washed over me, I was a quivering mess, damp hair plastered on my forehead.

The world came back into focus, and I was met with Manuel’s smug expression. I rolled my eyes.

“Better watch it, papacito, or I’ll wipe that smug smile off your face.”

He chuckled, his dark eyes shining with amusement.

“That’s Spanish,” he stated matter-of-factly.

My brow furrowed.

“No, that was English,” I corrected him.

“Papacito is Spanish. If you insist on calling me daddy, use *paparino*.”

The gravelly tone of his voice told me he’d love that very much, and I feared I would too.

Maybe for my next bestseller, I snorted mentally.

I went to answer when a loud bang on the door interrupted me.

“Athena, are you still sleeping?”

It was Raven. Placing my hand over Manuel's mouth, warning him to stay quiet, I answered with, "Not anymore. Do you have to bang like a maniac so early in the morning?"

"It's almost noon." She scoffed loudly, and my door rattled. "Why is your door locked?"

My eyes widened as I checked the clock on my nightstand. Holy shit. No wonder I felt rested.

"Maybe I wanted privacy for once," I told her, rolling my eyes and shuffling Manuel into my walk-in closet. "I didn't realize I slept in."

"*Amorina*, you're not hiding me. I'm not some teenage boy you're going to keep from your friends and family."

Raven kept rattling the door handle. "Did the noise from the street keep you up last night?"

"Huh?" I had a hard time listening to Raven's babbling and focusing on Manuel as I mouthed, "Please."

His wall of muscle wasn't budging from his spot.

"Yeah, like a fucking grand central station on our street in the middle of the night. And then I'm pretty sure someone picked our door and waltzed right through the front door."

My eyes widened as I met Manuel's smirk.

"Why didn't you come through the window?" I whispered.

He simply shrugged. "I'm too old to be climbing windows, playing Romeo."

I slapped a hand to my forehead. "Let me deal with my friends, you can make your own way out of here. And that means through the *window*—don't even think about going back the way you came."

EIGHTEEN

MANUEL



I'd thought I'd come and teach her a lesson, but the plan had quickly changed. So here I was, hiding in her closet while she tried to get rid of her friend. I couldn't believe the woman actually convinced me to hide in her closet. It was a first, even for me.

Cazzo, what the fuck was happening to me?

Just a few encounters with her and she'd already buried herself deep beneath my skin. I didn't know what the fuck I was going to do with her, but I knew I had to protect her. Surprisingly, it bothered me seeing Athena distressed. I ran my tongue across my teeth, the tension in my body refusing to release.

The closet door opened and I met Athena's gaze. She was wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt, that was slipping off her shoulder, looking entirely too innocent to be the offspring of Alexandra and Atticus or a victim wrapped up in some twisted revenge scheme by the Triads.

"Okay, out the window you go," she pouted.

I let out a dry breath.

"I don't think so." Her floral scent made my head feel fuzzy. The woman must be working some charms on me. "We need to talk."

She wrapped her arms around her stomach as if to protect herself from what was to come, then tilted her chin defensively. "About?"

"About the Triads and why they're after you?" Her connection to Atticus Popov couldn't be the only reason they were out to get her. If he screwed them over, they'd be focused solely on him.

She frowned. "How should I know?"

I cupped her face and ran a thumb across her cheek. "If I am to protect you efficiently, you need to be honest with me, Athena. And trust me when I say, I will be very unhappy if you gain even a scratch under my watch."

Her lips parted, a blush rising to her cheeks.

"Very romantic." She rose to her tiptoes and breathed against my lips. "But I really don't know. It only happened once before."

Alert ran through my blood. "What happened?"

She blinked. "What?"

I leaned in to nip her bottom lip to keep her distracted. "The Triads' attack. You said it happened once before."

She shrugged but couldn't hide the tension in her shoulders. Her fingers reached up, playing with the ends of my hair above my collar. "They attacked my mom, looking for some information. They kept saying she took something. I was just a kid back then, but it scared me."

My posture remained unmoved but vehemence rumbled through me.

"What happened?" She remained silent for several heartbeats, and my fingers laced through her hair at the small of her back. "Tell me what happened."

I watched her delicate neck move as she swallowed. "They came in the middle of the night and hurt Mama badly." She lifted a shoulder, looking past me, and something about the look in her eyes gutted me alive. "After that, she couldn't sing for a while."

My thoughts shifted back to that day when I found some kid singing backstage while Alexandra lip-synched, and somehow it made sense. It had to be connected to this attack.

"And did they hurt you, *amorina*?"

Tension rolled through me, but I forced myself to relax, not wanting to scare her. She buried her face against my neck, making a soft noise of approval. Her body pressed against mine felt good, but I couldn't help but think she was attempting to distract me.

"Tell me," I demanded.

"They scared me," she admitted. "Roughed me up a bit." The fury that shot through me should have been my first warning that this fierce protectiveness toward her had gotten out of hand. "Up until that day, I'd hoped my dad would come and take us away." Her voice was quiet, wistful. "But after, I never wanted to meet him. At least that wish came true."

I wasn't amused by her sarcasm.

"You can't stay here," I told her. "It's too dangerous. We're leaving."
When she didn't move, I added, "Today."

She blinked. "I can't leave, not now when my friends need me."

"Your friends would want you safe."

She closed her eyes for a moment before opening them with resignation.

"I know you're right, and I want to be smart about my safety, but I can't leave Reina right now. At least give me until her engagement party, and then I'll do whatever you think is best."

I admired her loyalty to her friend, and while I knew it wasn't the best decision, I heard myself answer, "Fine. But I'll assign guards to keep watch over you and the apartment when I can't be here myself."

She nodded somberly. "Okay, but can they be invisible?"

I let out a sardonic breath. "You'll never even know they're here."

I still couldn't shake the feeling that there was something she wasn't telling me. I would have called her on it right then, but my instincts warned me she wasn't ready yet.

However, this wasn't over. Not by a long shot.



I walked into the kitchen of Enrico's home around noon to find Enzo and Amadeo drinking shots of grappa.

"*Ma che—*" I snatched the bottle from Enzo's hands. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm having a shot right before an early afternoon *siesta*," Enzo answered like he was sipping on juice and not fucking alcohol.

"You're Italian, not Spanish," I gritted. "And you're fourteen, Enzo. One day you'll be head of the Marchetti empire. Act like it."

This was the last thing I needed. There had been reports of the Triads being spotted in France, and although I got hourly updates from the men I'd assigned to watch over Athena, it still set me on edge.

"Okay, *riposo*, then. Stop getting hung up on semantics, *zio mio*. We need grappa to warm us up. Italianos aren't meant to experience cold weather," Amadeo interjected.

Winter in Paris wasn't my favorite time of year either. It constantly drizzled, unlike in southern Italy.

Since the attack in Athena's bedroom, I was getting increasingly impatient. I had men constantly on her tail when I wasn't able to be with her. I'd also had cameras installed in her apartment, much to her dismay. Conscious of scaring her away with my overbearing nature, I promised her I'd only check the footage if there were reports of suspicious activity in the area.

Once her friend Reina's engagement to the Leone brother was behind us, I intended to take Athena away. That was the only way I could really protect her.

"Cranky, *zio mio*?" Amadeo asked, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"I noticed you were eyeing our *matrigna*'s friend," smartass Enzo added.

"Forget your *matrigna*'s friends. I better not catch you drinking grappa like it's Fireball. *Capisce*?"

They both nodded gravely, giving me their full attention, but their eyes gleamed mischievously.

"Isla's friend, Athena, will be our *zia*. *Davvero*?" Amadeo was an expert at changing subjects.

I pointed at both of them, narrowing my eyes. "Don't worry yourself about things that don't concern you." I reached for the espresso the cook had prepared and left for me on the warmer. "You better pray I don't inform your father that you're emptying his liquor cabinet."

The little shits laughed.

"It will be fun with young *ragazze* around rather than the usual old men," Amadeo drawled.

I swatted his head. "*Sono le donne. Voi due siete ragazzi.*" They're women. You two are boys.

Amadeo puffed his chest. "But we know what to do. We read one of the books you bought."

I narrowed my eyes. "What books?"

"Stacks and stacks of romance novels by A.K. Mystique," Enzo drawled. "Dumb name, but they have very good... instructions. I lent some copies to a few friends."

I let out a string of curses. I should have known better than to have them all delivered here.

When I learned the details about Athena's pen name and her books, I tracked them all down and purchased every single copy. They'd be going to my home in Ischia first thing tomorrow morning where curious teenagers couldn't get their hands on them.

"We figured you wouldn't miss one," Amadeo drawled, shrugging. "Well, five. One for Enzo and one for me, three for our friends. It's very good."

Ma che cazzo? The fucking rascals had been snooping. "Neither one of you is old enough to read those books."

They shared a glance. These two would have to be on a short leash or they'd burn the world down before they were of age.

"Zio?" Enzo's expression got serious.

"Sì?"

"Do we have to be as old as you and Papà before we bring women into the castello?"

Books forgotten, I studied my nephew carefully, searching for a hint that he knew what awaited him. Arranged marriages weren't uncommon in our circles. Amadeo and Enzo understood that, especially if they expected to take the reins one day. Together.

"What do you think?" I retorted without answering him. I wanted him to enjoy his years before learning of his engagement to Penelope DiMauro.

Enzo tilted his head but said nothing while Amadeo rolled his eyes. "I'm not waiting until I'm old."

I stood up, ruffling their heads at the same time. "We shall see, *ragazzi*."

I refreshed my caffè, then headed for my office.

Enrico was with his young wife, so I knew he'd be tied up for a while. Lucky bastard. Fuck, I couldn't wait to have Athena with me every day, show her what I liked, hear her moans and cries as I learned every inch of her body. My dick pulsed, but I forced myself to lock away those cravings... for now.

While I waited for Enrico to extract himself from Isla, I read through the emails regarding next year's wine harvest.

Truth be told, I preferred my empire's legitimate work, but I was born for the illegitimate business—drug-running, gambling, and money laundering.

A short while later, Enrico entered with a satisfied grin on his face. He lowered himself into the seat across from me, and I pushed away from my

desk.

“How are you doing?” he asked.

“Took you long enough,” I retorted wryly.

He chuckled, unperturbed.

“I heard you’re cranky today. Maybe I should come back another time.”

I smoothed my tie, taking a second to compose myself before I responded.

“The Triads have been spotted in Omertà territory,” I stated, my voice portraying none of the turmoil brewing inside me.

“I heard.” Enrico sighed. “Lykos called.” I raised my brow, not expecting this from Costello. “I don’t understand what they could want.”

It was time to come clean. “They’re looking for someone.”

He angled his head, watching me pensively.

“Is that what’s got you in a lousy mood?”

“Partially.”

“I’m all ears, Manuel.”

My phone buzzed and I picked it up to see it was a message from a supplier, confirming another delivery went smoothly. Putting it on silent, I turned my attention to my nephew.

“The Triads are after Atticus’s ex-mistress and his illegitimate daughter.”

He frowned. “Nicki Popova?”

I shook my head.

“No, the illegitimate one. It turns out you were right, she does exist.” And she was right in front of our noses.

“What do they want with her?”

I shook my head. “My guess is to use her against Atticus for screwing them over twenty-three years ago.” Although, Athena’s comment about the Triads demanding information on something Alexandra took from them kept nagging at me.

“That’s quite the grudge.”

“It is,” I agreed. I still believed I was missing part of the story, but I didn’t know what. “Ghost has tracked down some information that you’ll find interesting.”

His brows furrowed. “He hasn’t sent me anything.”

I let out a sardonic breath. “Because I asked for it and he was getting me information on a certain woman.”

His lips twitched. "A woman?"

I sighed. "Don't start with me, *nipote*."

He put his hands up in surrender. "I wasn't going to." I knew he wouldn't be able to resist. "Does it have something to do with Isla's friend Athena?" I pinched the bridge of my nose. "By the way, I hear she's even younger than Isla."

"*Vaffanculo*." I pounded my fist on the table. "I'm not in the mood."

He grinned. "Neither was I. Remember?"

Karma was a bitch.

"*Cazzo*, it was more fun when it was about you," I retorted dryly.

"I bet. Just like it's more fun for me now." He laughed when I crossed my arms over my chest. "So, are you going to explain to me how Athena is connected to the Triads and Atticus?"

A heartbeat passed. Tense and ominous.

"She's Atticus's illegitimate daughter."

He sat up straight. "You're shitting me."

"I wish."

"It has to be a mistake."

I shook my head. "It's not. Remember the opera singer I told you I dated *briefly*, years back?"

"Vaguely. Wasn't she a fraud? She had a kid singing off-stage while she lip-synced."

"Something like that. Turns out she was attacked by the Triads the night before her performance, which is why she couldn't sing. Alexandra was Atticus's mistress, and Athena is their daughter."

"Get the fuck out. You're kidding me."

I tapped my fingers on my desk. "You see me laughing?"

"How would Lykos Costello know about any of this?"

I leaned back. We all kept secrets, and Lykos was no exception. "Because she's his niece. Lykos's wife is... was... Alexandra's older sister."

"But she's dead," he claimed. "I attended her funeral."

I shrugged, giving him a pointed look. Perception was everything in our world and we knew it. After Enrico's brother died, we played our own scheme to ensure the Marchetti territory remained strong until Enzo was old enough to take over.

He leaned back in his chair and considered this news. "How do the Triads come into play?"

The Marchettis had never worked alongside them, but there'd been other families that tested those waters. It never ended well.

The Triads were known for their unpredictability. If they'd zeroed in on Athena, it was only a matter of time before they got their filthy paws on her.

Unless I got her away from here.

"Remember how Atticus fucked them over way back when?" He nodded, remembering the whole fiasco of flesh smuggling over the Greek territory. Atticus was into flesh trading and continued the practice until his son took over. "This has to be their payback."

The line between his brows deepened. "Why wouldn't he just settle the score with interest like he did with the Albanians and the Cortes cartel? It's not like he's short on money, and his son, Danil, made their empire ten times bigger."

"I don't know." Which was exactly what was bothering me. Danil went out of his way to settle his father's scores, making the people Atticus fucked over very rich. "But I plan on taking Athena to my castello."

Nobody apart from Enrico knew of its location. It'd be the safest place for Athena.

"Probably a good idea." Then Enrico smirked. "So you were sleeping with her mother a decade ago, and now you're sleeping with the daughter."

I shot him an annoyed look. "I never fucked Alexandra."

"*Cristo*, that was a close one, Manuel. I'd like to see you explain that to your new young bride."

I narrowed my eyes on him. "I never said I was marrying her."

He rose out of his chair and laughed his ass off all the way out of my office.

NINETEEN ATHENA



While I had an earbud in one ear and paying attention to my surroundings with the other, I slipped out of the bookstore and started walking toward my apartment.

I couldn't keep a smile off my face.

Despite my recent encounter with some crazy ninjas, my life was going surprisingly well. My proudly smutty books were selling, and I had just signed a large batch of paperbacks for a local store.

Glancing over my shoulder, I couldn't see the guards Manuel assigned to me, but I could sense them. Being followed definitely wasn't something I loved, but it did offer me some peace of mind.

Ignoring their presence, I crossed the street, ensuring I waited until there wasn't a car in sight so they could follow me safely. It was silly, but I didn't want them putting their life in danger.

I stretched my right arm, flexing my wrist that had cramped from signing two hundred copies.

It's a good problem to have, I thought to myself, smiling.

Life worked in mysterious ways sometimes. When I was younger, I would have never guessed that Manuel Marchetti would become my protector.

Strange, because my mother had never offered me the protection that her lovers provided for her. Not that I had wanted it, and of course it would have been difficult to explain since she kept me a secret from them.

Besides, it was probably for the best considering all the shit Raven got into in high school. I was homeschooled up until I turned fourteen, then Mom put me in a private boarding school on the East Coast. It was where I met Raven, the two of us clicking instantly.

Yes, it sucked not having a parent during my growth spurt and hormonal changes, but Raven was there for me.

I turned the corner and passed a row of cafés, their outdoor seating filled with Parisians. My eyes traveled over their smiling faces, many of them with cigarettes between their fingers.

It was then that I noticed a man in the reflection of the café. My footsteps faltered and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up.

He looked like... Atticus Popov. The father I'd never met.

No, it couldn't be.

I whirled around, but the man was gone. I blew out a long exhale. My mind must be playing tricks on me. After all, it would make no sense for Atticus to be trailing me. He hadn't made contact in twenty-three years, he had no reason to start now.

I turned around to resume walking and ran into a strong body.

"Ah, fuck," I muttered, rubbing my forehead.

"*Signómi.*" I'm sorry.

Shocked at hearing Greek, I raised my eyes up to a man who emanated power. He was handsome, with thick, wavy dark hair and piercing brown eyes. His chiseled jaw was covered with stubble and he wore a three-piece suit I had started associating with mobsters.

"No, I'm sorry," I murmured in French. Why would he have said anything in Greek to me? "It was my fault, not paying attention."

He nodded, agreeing with me, and my cheeks heated with annoyance. The polite thing would have been to disagree, but I kept my expression polite as I attempted to sidestep him.

He mirrored my move and we remained facing each other. He cocked a brow in a cavalier way.

"Excuse me," I muttered as he smoothed a hand down his tie absentmindedly.

The edge of his lips curled as he studied me.

"You shouldn't be roaming the streets," the stranger warned softly, then walked around me and disappeared around the corner as I stared after him flabbergasted.

Reina's engagement party better hurry up, because I didn't have a good feeling about any of this.



"I just don't think it's the right time to go clubbing," I told Raven who was already dressed to the nines and ready to go. She'd cornered me in our little kitchen and I sensed her determination. She wouldn't back down until I agreed to go with her.

I was still reeling from yesterday's strange encounter. Not only that, I couldn't shake the anxious feelings since seeing my father's reflection.

Yet, my bodyguard seemed not to have seen him, so maybe it was all in my head.

"Please, Athena." Raven batted her lashes and pouted her lips, going for the full effect. "It's just down to you and me."

I rolled my eyes. "Reina isn't married yet. And Phoenix—"

Raven laughed. "You're so out of touch with reality sometimes. I attribute it to you living in your fictional worlds more often than not, but you really have to start seeing things that are right in front of your face."

She eyed me meaningfully, but I was too tired to ask her to clarify.

"Honestly, I'm exhausted. I'll just spoil your fun," I told her. Not to mention, I was slightly paranoid. Yes, I wanted to stay here as moral support for Reina, but going clubbing would be reckless.

Raven reached for a bottle of vodka, poured some of it into a shot glass, and handed it to me.

"This will boost your energy." When I didn't make an effort to move, she tried a different approach. "Please, I need your help tonight. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important."

I sighed, unable to resist her plea. She was always there for me, and she asked for so little in return.

I tossed back the shot that was placed in front of me and put on the dress she already picked out for me.

An hour later, we were at the club the Leone brothers owned. I couldn't believe we were back here. It was a full-circle moment, and it certainly made sense that Raven wouldn't have asked the Romero sisters to join us.

For years, we'd stayed away from it after an idiot slipped a drug into Reina's drink in an attempt to take advantage of her. Everything ended well—sort of. The Leone brothers swooped in for a swift rescue and the rest was history.

"Remind me why we're here again?" I asked Raven. I shuffled from foot to foot and blew hot air into my hands—it was a chilly night, but I was glad I let her drag me out. We looked good. My hair was pulled up in a high ponytail and I wore a black strapless dress while Raven opted for a red fitted dress and let her hair hang loosely down her back. We had on our bulky coats, but soon we'd be free of them and in search of the dance floor.

She flashed me a big, beaming smile. "I heard someone was here."

"Who?"

"I can't tell you."

I sighed. "I deserve to know since you dragged me to the club."

"Well, I couldn't drag Reina or Phoenix here. Not after all the shit that happened last time," she said, echoing my thoughts.

We were instantly let into the club where we checked our coats and made our way through the mass of sweat-drenched bodies.

"Prime spot," she yelled over the loud music, sliding into a booth beneath a blinding red, yellow, and purple LED sign.

It took no time for us to get inundated with drink offers. We refused them all, not wanting a repeat of what happened to Reina. For the next hour, we sipped fruity cocktails, we danced, we laughed, and we drank some more.

When it became difficult to string a whole sentence together, I stopped dancing and headed to the bar for a bottle of water. It was reckless for both of us to get so tipsy.

The bartender handed me a bottle and I took a sip, turning to see Raven dancing happily with a tall, six-foot-something hottie. His hands came to rest on her hips and I narrowed my eyes.

Aiden Callahan.

Now I knew exactly why Raven wanted to come.

I pushed off the bar table to tell her I was ready to go home. The last time that asshole broke her heart, she'd all but lost the will to live. It was the last thing any of us needed.

Halfway across the dance floor, my elbow was clasped in a tight grip and I whirled around, ready to teach some asshole a lesson. I blinked twice

when Manuel pulled me close, his face expressionless.

We stared at each other, a thick, almost suffocating tension filling the air before he dragged me toward a quiet corner—not unlike the first time we’d met, come to think of it—and pressed my back against the wall. Somehow it felt like there wasn’t enough oxygen in this nightclub.

“How drunk are you?” His jaw flexed. “I didn’t believe the guards I assigned to you when they sent me an update that you’d gone clubbing.”

Unease rose up but I ignored it. Instead, I batted my lashes stupidly at him and smiled.

“What are you doing here?”

He didn’t seem overly excited to see me. Maybe he had time to think over my connection to my mom and Atticus Popov and decided I wasn’t worth his time. After all, I hadn’t seen or heard from him since the night he spent in my bedroom when I admitted the Triads attacked my mom eleven years ago.

Although he was still protecting me, I wasn’t sure whether he still *wanted* me. Maybe he only felt responsible to provide protection, not his attention.

I wasn’t usually insecure, always able to take or leave most men. I often feared my heart was made of ice and love would never find me.

Something was different with this one though, I just wasn’t able to put my finger on what. Maybe his incredible skills between the sheets. Or those incredible muscles.

Or maybe you got daddy issues, my mind mocked. I immediately shut it down. There wasn’t any room for mockery in my life.

“Maybe I came to find a new one-night stand,” I told him, choking on my fury.

“Don’t fuck with me, *amorina*, or you won’t like the ending,” he said softly and something dark moved through his eyes.

Apprehension rose up to choke me and I swallowed, trying to keep my voice steady. Manuel could be so easygoing one moment and so tense the next.

“Why are you mad? You haven’t contacted me in almost two weeks.” A sliver of irritation ran through me hearing the bitterness in my voice. “It’s not like we’re an item or anything,” I told him, anger scratching my throat.

Frustration chafed beneath my skin—mostly at myself. I guess not hearing from him for two weeks hurt more than I cared to admit.

His hands appeared above my head, his shoulders blocking the world around us, something about his presence heavy and palpable.

"I might have not contacted you, but I thought about you." His rough words filled the air between us as he leaned in closer, his cologne intoxicating all my senses.

"Don't," I whispered, my heart thudding erratically. "Don't appease me just because I called you out on it," I said, laughing uncomfortably so he couldn't tell it hurt me not to hear from him.

I didn't know why, but damn it, it felt like being abandoned. Again.

"I'm not in the habit of saying what I don't mean, Athena." He took my chin between his fingers and I grew distracted by his hand. It was strong and veiny, and I knew how good it felt against my skin. "I've been working on chasing leads on the Triads. To keep you safe."

His gaze dropped to my lips and a flash of something sinful passed his expression before he seemed to cave in to this pull and brush his mouth against mine for the briefest moment.

"No man, dead or alive, could forget you," he said, breathing life into me.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach as I inhaled his intoxicating scent. I met his dark gaze, every nerve in my body tingling in expectation.

"Now tell me what you're doing here," he demanded softly.

"Dancing?" My answer came out as a question. "How about you?" I asked bravely, my senses engulfed by his closeness. "Dance clubs don't seem like your scene. Too old and all—"

"Don't you say it, *amorina*," he teased, and my spirits instantly lifted. I should be alarmed at how easily my mood changed knowing he hadn't just abandoned me. "We both know you need an experienced, firmer, and *older* hand, and none of the *stronzos* in this club fit the bill."

"Well, I wouldn't say none," I said, straight-faced. "You're in this club, aren't you?"

He brushed his thumb over my bottom lip before dipping it into my mouth. On instinct, I sucked on it and watched his eyes flare with heat.

I hummed in approval as I closed my eyes and swayed on my feet.

"You *are* drunk," he groaned, giving me a dry stare.

"Not drunk enough, handsome," I murmured, and he immediately stiffened. "What, you don't like that title?" I sighed when his expression didn't ease up. "Italian daddy?"

“Stop, Athena. Being drunk and alone in a nightclub is never smart.”

A playful grin curved my lips. “I’m not drunk. Not for long anyhow. I just drank an entire bottle of water. And I’m not alone.”

He wrapped his strong arm around my waist. “You’re leaving now.”

My eyes snapped to him. “I can’t leave Raven.”

“Trust me, she’s in good hands.”

I shook my head. “No, she’s not. Aiden Callahan is the devil, horns and all.”

He chuckled. “Really? I must have missed those.”

I nodded seriously despite the nausea flooding my stomach. “Trust me, we have to take her with us.”

He let out a sardonic breath. “As you wish. Let’s go find her, and then I’m taking you both home.”

I leaned toward him, burying my face into his well-carved chest. “Maybe we can hook up again tonight.” I took a deep whiff of his scent before I slurred my next words. “You smell so good, it makes me horny.”

Manuel’s lips brushed my ear, sending goose bumps scattering across my body. “Not until you sober up.”

I snorted and broke into a fit of giggles for no good reason. I tried to regain control of myself but failed. Maybe I was drunker than I thought.

I muttered something about using the bathroom, and Manuel followed me inside.

“Everyone out,” he barked while I struggled to pull my dress over my hips.

Heels clacked against the floor and then the door shut.

I sighed, suddenly feeling better already, and exited the stall.

“You okay?” His serious tone shattered the silence as I leaned over the sink and washed my hands.

I met his eyes in the mirror. “You really have to learn some rules about women’s privacy.”

“I asked you a question.”

Tension hung thickly in the air, but I refused to let it get to me. I waved my hand in the air, splashing droplets of water everywhere.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m okay. Just tipsy, and that water really made me have to pee.”

He took my hand into his and said, “Let’s find your friend and get the fuck out of here.”

“That sounds great.” It was the last time I was drinking those damn fruity drinks. I barely had three and I felt like I’d been hit by a train.

Unfortunately, by the time we returned to the dance floor, Raven was nowhere to be found, and when I checked my phone, there was a single text waiting for me.

Raven: 🐱 Wish me luck.

“Damn traitor. I hope she doesn’t get any,” I muttered under my breath, shoving the screen with the message into Manuel’s face, completely missing the last emoji and meaning behind it. “I’m going to put her in my book and then kill her off.”

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TWENTY MANUEL



I had not expected to run into Athena at the Leone brothers' nightclub—least of all drunk as a sailor. I was there to recruit Giovanni Agosti to help with the Triads. I had no contacts in the Albanian mafia and the Cortes cartel were out of the question, but as the direct heir to the Tijuana organization, he would be able to dig back through the Tijuana cartel records. I needed to know the missing piece of this entire puzzle, and my instincts warned it started with that deal Atticus screwed up twenty-three years ago.

Once at my penthouse, which I kept for my private use, I gave Athena aspirin and a glass of water, then tucked her into my bed. The moment her head hit the pillow, she let out a soft sigh and her lashes fluttered shut.

I was just stepping away when she jerked, sitting upright and looking around frantically. "Wh-where's the window?"

"It's shut." I wondered whether she was cold, if maybe I needed to bring her an extra blanket.

Terror skidded across her expression, her eyes darting around with wild panic. "I need to see the sky." Her hand came to her chest, tapping it faster and faster. "Open the curtain. Please, please."

I found her reaction strange, but I wasn't going to fuel her anxiety, no matter how confusing it seemed. I rushed and pulled them open, and her shoulders instantly slumped as she fell back onto the pillows.

"What are you so afraid of, *amorina*?"

"I'm not afraid of anything."

“Bullshit,” I told her softly. She closed her eyes, but not before a tear slipped down her cheek. I closed the distance between us, sitting down on the edge of the bed, then wiped the tear away with my thumb, fierce protectiveness rising inside me. “It’s okay to be afraid, but you have to face those fears. Otherwise they fester.”

A gulp filled the silence. “Speaking from experience?”

I wound my fingers through her hair, marveling at the silkiness of it. “We’re all scared of something.”

“What are you scared of?”

“Loving someone and losing them,” I told her softly. It was a fear I’d harbored since I was a little boy—not that it had been enough to keep me away lately—but I kept that thought to myself. “I’ve seen what that kind of loss does to people. I saw what it did to my parents, my brother, and I... I hate the helplessness that comes along with it.”

Her eyes opened, those striking greens sparkling like emeralds when our gazes met.

“Me too. Love brings nothing but trouble and pain,” she mumbled, peering at me from under her lashes. “But it’s supposed to hurt, otherwise it’s not love.”

“*Che, amorina?*”

“My mother’s words. They still haunt me, you know.” Her eyes filled with tears, and something about them gave me pause. They were tears of anguish and pain. “She cried a lot back then.”

“It’s not always so,” I told her softly. “Our parents’ lives aren’t ours. Your mom’s pain shouldn’t be yours.”

“Maybe.”

“No, not maybe. No child should suffer through their parents’ breakup.”

She chuckled. “Well, I wasn’t exactly around for her breakup with my father, was I?”

“It doesn’t make your experience with the others any less unfair,” I pointed out. “It’s not on you to comfort her through her heartbreaks.”

She opened her eyes, meeting my gaze. “You mean when she broke up with you?”

I thought back to the short time that I’d dated Alexandra—if it could even be called dating. She was beautiful and had a magnetism about her, but we never truly clicked. Then the antics she pulled after I caught her little

performance at the opera... I had been more than happy never to see her again.

"I'm not sure what we had would've qualified as a relationship, let alone a breakup, *amorina*. I took her out twice, maybe three times before we went our separate ways. It's hardly a love story."

"She liked you," she murmured. "Probably still does. I think it was the last time I saw her cry."

"That's regrettable, but I never led her on. I made my intentions very clear from the start. What we had was mutually beneficial—I needed someone to accompany me to events for appearances' sake, and she was happy to don her finest threads and be wined and dined," I said dryly. "And anyway, in case you missed it, I'm not interested in your mother."

I wanted nothing more than to admit to Athena that I couldn't get enough of her, that I hadn't so much as *looked* at another woman in weeks, but I didn't think she was ready to hear it. Nonetheless, I'd make it my life's mission to prove to her that loving someone shouldn't—wouldn't—hurt.

"My parents loved each other very much and they were happy," I told her. "My father would often say my mother left no room for sorrow. That she was the brightest spot in his life. It wasn't until she died that his life lost its spark. So you see, *amorina*? It's losing someone that hurts. But love is worth it."

She tilted her head pensively. "Then they must be an exception to the rule."

She had much to learn, but there'd be time for that. For now, I wanted to learn more about her.

"You're American, right?" She nodded. "Did you like growing up there?"

She sighed. "I guess. We traveled a lot when I was younger, so Europe felt more like home. Sometimes during her tours though, whenever we weren't in the States, Mom would leave me with a nanny, then go back to the States to take care of urgent matters."

"She didn't take you with her?"

Athena shrugged. "I heard she had to go help someone once. A girl."

"A girl?"

"Unless I heard it wrong," she muttered. "It's hard for me to understand Greek unless it's spoken slowly."

I tucked that piece of information away.

“So how did you end up picking up the accent?”

“Mom has the American accent, so I guess I picked it up from her.” Wariness crept over her expression before she continued. “After the whole thing with the Triads, we went back and stayed in the States permanently, although we moved along the East Coast quite a bit. Mom lasted only a few years, then she sent me to boarding school and continued touring.”

A knot formed in my chest at the image of her all alone.

“But you had other family in the States, sì?”

She stared at me with a strange expression on her face. “It was always just me and her. But I met Raven at boarding school, then a few years later, Isla, Phoenix, and Reina, so it was worth it.”

The unspoken words lingered. The loneliness was worth it. *Cazzo*, Alexandra was a selfish bitch to leave her daughter alone after keeping her isolated for so many years.

She could have asked Lykos to take her and he would have. He might have hated Alexandra, but he wouldn’t have faulted Athena. He was big on family.

I bent to kiss her and her lips molded to mine, her tongue eager. Kissing this woman was unlike anything else. She gave as good as she got, her hands threaded through my hair.

“Do you know you have family in Greece?” I asked when she began kissing my neck.

She arched back and blinked, slightly disoriented, before she got herself together.

“So I learned recently.” Bitterness laced through her words.

“You never knew?”

“No.” She swallowed, her slim neck moving gracefully. “Sometimes when I get upset, I like to put people in my books and kill them.” Her cheeks turned crimson at the admission.

I grabbed her face in both of my hands. “Does that make you feel better?”

“It really does. Maybe I’m bloodthirsty and evil.”

I chuckled. “Very unlikely.”

“I write romance, you know,” she mumbled. “Smutty, hot romance. Although, I do sprinkle some plot to it... and the occasional murder.”

My lips twitched, but I said nothing. It wasn’t the right time to tell her I knew about her smutty novels under the pseudonym A.K. Mystique, or that

I'd procured a copy of every single title.

"So I heard."

"My mother doesn't know."

My eyebrows shot up. "Why not?"

She shrugged. "She wouldn't approve."

"Does it make you happy?"

Her full lips curved into a soft smile. "Yeah."

"That's all that matters."

Her gaze darted to the window again and she shivered. "Do you think the ninja men will kill me? Or be back? Maybe they'll wait another eleven years before coming for me again." *Again?* A light tremor laced her voice while I pondered what else she was hiding. "I don't want to be in the news as a girl who died in a mysterious way."

The thought of her being hurt made it so fucking hard to breathe. Sweat coated my skin at the mental image of her dead body, shaking me down to the bone.

"I won't let them." And I meant it. No matter how fucked up this world was, it was a better place with her in it.

"I have no idea why, but I believe you," she whispered. "You really weren't blowing me off for the past two weeks?" she asked, studying me.

"*Te lo prometto.*" I promise. "Who in their right mind would blow you off, *amorina?*"

I had been busy chasing leads and digging into the past to understand why the Triads wanted Athena. It wasn't as if Atticus had a relationship going with her or her mother. There had to be more to it than Atticus double-crossing them.

"Good," she mumbled. "Because I sort of like you."

Something about her words settled into my bones. A sense of rightness I'd never experienced with anyone else.

"Ugh, why is the room spinning?"

I chuckled, then kissed her forehead. "Try to get some sleep now."

She talked some more, most of her words unintelligible, but I didn't stop her. It was nice, getting insight into her soul and her mind, and it wasn't long before she drifted off to sleep. I slipped out of the room and headed toward my office to make a few phone calls.

I shrugged out of my suit jacket and rolled up my sleeves while dialing Enrico on the secure line.

He picked up on the first ring. "Manuel?"

I took a seat.

"Sì. You seem eager to talk to me." I heard shuffling on the other end, like he was moving to a place where he wouldn't be overheard.

"Danil Popov is sniffing around the Omertà," he finally said. "He's in Paris, asking about Romero and even the Leone brothers."

"It's a good thing they don't know anything, then," I said. "Have you called Danil?"

"I have, but the *stronzo* isn't taking my calls. He had that friend of his, Soren, call me and give me some bullshit story."

"What story exactly?"

"They're not conducting any business. Just settling a debt. Now get this," he sneered. "The Triads are collecting on a debt."

I laughed, but it was without humor. "If the Triads or Danil think I'll let them get anywhere near Athena, they'll have a war on their hands."

"Do you think Danil is after her too?"

"He better not be or he'll lose the Balkans to the Omertà."

"Soren did say one thing that struck me as odd," he added.

"What's that?"

"He said Alexandra isn't trustworthy."

Nothing new there.

My cell phone rang and I flicked a glance at it. "Speak of the devil."

Enrico's chuckle came over the line. "Don't fucking tell me Danil's calling you."

"That's right," I told him. "*Allora*, maybe we're finally getting somewhere."

"Go handle the smug bastard and let me know what you need from me."

Enrico's line went dead and I answered my cell with, "What a surprise, Danil."

"Manuel Marchetti." His greetings left much to be desired.

"I hear you've been snooping around Omertà territory."

For a moment, the line was silent, and I had to check to ensure I didn't lose him. "Trust me, Marchetti, if I wanted it, I would have it before you and your idiot members could blink."

Though he couldn't see me, I let my lips curve into a malevolent grin. "You could try, but I guarantee you'd fail."

"I heard you dated an opera singer once upon a time."

I scoffed. “I sure as fuck hope you didn’t call to chitchat about my dating life.”

“Who you fuck is none of my concern,” he gritted. “You went to see Alexandra Kosta recently. I want to know what she told you.”

Danil might play hardball, but he wouldn’t get shit from me. “She talks a lot, as I’m sure you know.”

“All I know is the woman is a selfish bitch who fucks anything that moves.”

I chuckled darkly. “You seem to speak from experience.”

“I wouldn’t touch that woman with a ten-foot pole. But I don’t think I can say the same about you, can I?”

I drummed my fingers against my mahogany desk. “You need to fire whoever’s feeding you intel.”

Danil had nothing on me. I was telling Athena the truth earlier—her mother and I never had that type of relationship. Whatever his problem with Alexandra was, he could go take it up with her. My only concern was Athena and keeping her out of harm’s way.

“A word of advice.” Danil’s cold, calculated voice came over the line. “Alexandra isn’t trustworthy. She’d sacrifice an innocent lamb to protect herself. When her time comes, get in my way and I’ll end you both.”

And the line went dead.

TWENTY-ONE

ATHENA



I woke up wearing nothing but my underwear. My hair had been pulled back and my face cleaned. I snuggled deeper into the soft sheets, the quilt tucked around me. A familiar, masculine scent surrounded me and I stretched out leisurely, my muscles relaxed.

The creak of a door sounded and I quickly sat up, dizziness overwhelming me. I rubbed at my temples and met Manuel's amused gaze. He was wearing nothing but a towel, his body wet from a shower.

I let my eyes roam his glistening pecs and the firm planes of his midsection. The silver fox was in top shape, that much was becoming increasingly obvious.

I bit my lip, picturing myself licking every inch of his sculpted stomach.

"How are you feeling?" He laughed, clearly amused by my ogling.

"Great," I murmured as he dropped the towel and started getting dressed in front of me. "Just great. Totally... great."

Now my vocabulary was suffering too. Nothing spoke of a promising career in writing like a limited vocabulary. I glanced around the luxurious bedroom with sleek modern furniture and couldn't pinpoint a single item that seemed personal to Manuel.

"Where are we?"

"One of my penthouses."

"Is this where you bring your women?" I winced at the blatant jealousy my words broadcasted.

"You're the first one."

“Oh.” I glanced at him and found him sorting through his clothes. “Did I embarrass myself last night?” *Please say no. Please say no.*

“You’re a cute drunk,” he said as he pulled on his slacks and tightened his belt. I narrowed my eyes on him. “And don’t worry, I didn’t take advantage of you.” He flicked his chin toward the bedside table. “Take more aspirin and drink some water, then try to get some food in your stomach.”

Gosh, he’d thought of everything. I reached for the pill bottle and washed a couple down with water, then took a bite of the plain waffle.

“I should apologize,” I mumbled around a mouthful.

He chuckled. “I actually had fun.”

“You did?”

“Like I said, you’re a fun drunk. You talked a lot.”

I covered my face with my hands. “Shit. Did I tell you all my secrets?”

Now dressed, he came over and sat next to me. “You told me about your friends, about your writing. Something about chopping up a body, but you slurred a lot during that story, so you’ll have to tell me more about it later.” There was no way I’d ever share that secret. It was Reina’s secret to tell. “Oh, and you talked a lot about fucking me. You said you want to take advantage of me in some rather naughty ways. I *almost* blushed.”

Horror and shame filled me and I pulled the covers over my head, leaving me bare to him from the waist down aside from the panties. “Oh my God.”

“Don’t hide from me. It only makes me want you more.” He pinched my side and I squirmed, a giggle bubbling to the surface. “I liked your dirty talk. If you’d been sober, I would’ve had my way with you.”

The corners of my lips hitched despite my embarrassment. “You would, huh?”

“*Certamente, amorina.*”

I batted my eyelashes seductively. “You could... you know... punish me. Since I made you leave the club when you were having so much fun and everything.”

He let my words hang in the air for a solid three seconds before he issued a demand. “Get in front of the mirror and kneel. I’m going to fuck that smart mouth of yours.”

Arousal and anticipation sent shivers dancing across my skin. I glanced across the bedroom where a large standing mirror stood, watching as my

blush spread deeper.

Snaking his hand between my legs, he cupped my pussy, the thin fabric doing nothing to conceal how soaked I was. He slammed his mouth on mine for a scorching kiss, our tongues tangling, exploring, then without a warning, he lightly slapped my core.

My eyes flared. "What—"

"I expect to be obeyed. Get over there, on your knees, hands behind your back."

I gasped, then understanding dawned on me. I grumbled half-heartedly as I slid off the bed, sauntering across the room before flicking a glance over my shoulder.

"Just so we understand each other... I'm only obeying because *I* want this."

Then I lowered to my knees, holding his stare the entire time. He stood up and made his way over to me leisurely.

He palmed the side of my cheek, running his thumb over my mouth as he unbuckled his pants, the sound of his zipper sending a seductive echo through the space.

"Whose pretty mouth is this, *amorina*?" he rasped, fisting his hard length.

"Yours," I answered eagerly, licking my lips.

He chuckled darkly. "No more drunken recklessness. Not when you're alone and vulnerable."

"I wasn't alone."

"You weren't with me," he tutted. "Now, do you want to be punished or rewarded?"

Fuck, what did I want? I was tempted to ask what made up each category but decided against it.

"Both?"

His eyes heated and his cock visibly hardened. I couldn't help a smug smile from spreading on my face.

"You're a naughty girl," he said darkly. "Open your mouth."

I tilted my chin and opened my mouth. His length was already dripping with pre-cum, and he smeared it over my bottom lip. I darted my tongue out and licked it clean, the musky taste going straight to my core.

"Mmmm," I moaned appreciatively. "Are you going to choke me with your cock now? Punish me for getting tipsy?"

He thrust all the way to the back of my throat without warning.

“That’s enough talking.” The arousal in his eyes matched my own, and I could see his pulse fluttering on his broad neck. He might seem cool and collected, but I knew this man was at my mercy.

I forced my throat to relax, welcoming his thick length. I teased the tip of his cock with my tongue, sucking and moaning around it as he thrust in and out.

His hand slinked around to the nape of my neck, tangling his fingers in my hair and driving his dick into my mouth. He fucked my face like a man *possessed*.

“Look,” he gritted, never easing his thrusts. “Look at who owns you.”

From my position, I managed to dart my eyes to the mirror. My eyes widened as I took in our reflection, and I had to clench my thighs. It was the most erotic thing I’d ever seen. Nothing—fucking *nothing*—came even close to this.

My swollen red lips wrapped around his engorged cock, tears streaming down my face as he dominated my mouth. It was *so damn hot*. Being on my knees for him. Bringing him pleasure. I was so wet there had to be a puddle around me.

“Such a dirty girl. I’m wrecking your mouth, but you’re wrecking me.” I gagged and choked, taking him in deeper. The sounds were animalistic as they bounced up my throat, desperate for his cum. He must have seen it on my face as I bobbed my head. Up and down. Panting and whimpering. “You want my cum painting your throat, your face. Don’t you?”

I blinked, nodding furiously.

I’m ruined.

I’d never been fond of giving blowjobs, but I was beginning to think with the right partner, it might just be my new favorite thing. Because as it stood, I felt like I might die if I didn’t get him off.

“Touch your pussy for me,” he grunted in between thrusts.

Without hesitation, I did as he commanded, pushing my fingers into my panties. My slickness coated my pussy. I circled my clit, humming in pleasure.

“*Cazzo, amorina*. You’re doing so good.” I moaned again and his nostrils flared. “Your mouth looks beautiful filled with my cock.”

He thrust faster and I rubbed my throbbing clit mindlessly, my muffled cries spurring him on.

I pushed a finger inside my clenching pussy, whimpering with an impending orgasm that threatened to erupt like a volcano.

My eyelids fluttered shut and he barked, "Eyes on us. Watch me smear my cum all over you, my greedy little slut."

He fucked my face viciously, bruising my mouth. Each thrust of his hips brought us both closer to release.

He reached down and pinched my nipple, and stars exploded in my vision. My body shuddered and my hips jerked. The climax ripped through me as he pounded himself into my mouth.

I caught a glimpse of us in the mirror. We looked undone. Manuel dressed in his three-piece suit with me kneeling in front of him in my black lace panties. His hand gripped my hair while rope after rope of his cum filled my mouth.

Without warning, his fingers yanked my hair forward, and with a final violent thrust, he buried himself further. My nose pressed against his skin, I felt like I could come again.

I greedily sucked his shaft, swallowing every last drop.

When he finally released me, I collapsed against the mirror, my jaw aching as I scrambled to suck in cool air. He stood in front of me, his breaths just as harsh, watching me with an indecipherable look in his eyes.

He scooped me up into his strong arms and I squealed, but his mouth found mine, swallowing the sound and giving me the most tender kiss of my life.

"What are you doing?" I breathed, my muscles limp as he dropped me on the bed.

"I'm rewarding you." He dragged my panties down my legs, then grasped the back of my neck, pressing his mouth to mine again before murmuring against my lips, "Lie back and spread your legs."

His hand slid between my legs, pushing two fingers inside me, and I dropped my head back against the pillows with a moan.

Slipping his fingers out of me, he grasped the backs of my thighs, hooking them over his shoulders.

"My turn," he grunted as he settled between my legs.

Pleasure instantly tore through me, filling me with an inferno as he licked and sucked on my clit. He moved his mouth over me, nipping gently as I clutched at the sheets.

Then he dragged his tongue down and pushed into me, fucking my pussy with it, until he had me losing my mind.

I raked my fingers through his hair, tugging on him and grinding against his face.

“Oh... my... please,” I panted.

He pulled away, kissing the inside of my thigh.

“Tell me what you want,” he whispered, his thumb brushing over my pussy. I pushed my hips back up to his face, but his grip on me was firm.

Our eyes locked and I bit down on my lip harshly. “Use your tongue, your cock, whatever you want. But for the love of all that’s holy, *fuck me* already.”

He smirked, then dove back in, replacing his tongue with his fingers. My legs hooked over his shoulders, his dark head working me expertly, he grunted like he was enjoying the best meal of his life. It took mere minutes to bring me to the edge as he latched on to my clit and sucked, his eyes never leaving mine.

Just like that, I came all over his tongue while he continued lapping at me, leaving me breathless and shuddering.

“We’re not done yet,” he gritted, gently setting my limp legs back on his bed.

Pulling away, I got a good look at his sweat-slicked chest. God, this man had a gorgeous body. Sculpted muscles that would put any statue to shame. And then there was the matter of his thick cock.

He leaned over me, holding himself up on his strong forearm, and used his free hand to position his cock against my throbbing entrance.

The moment he pushed the tip into me, we both groaned.

“*Cazzo.*”

“Fuck.”

He smiled at me and pushed all the way in, filling me to the hilt.

“There’s no going back from you.” My arms wrapped around his neck and my legs around his hips. “Your pussy was made for me.”

I was barely hanging on to reality as he rolled his hips, fucking me languidly. He bent his head and kissed me as he moved in and out. I moaned into his mouth, needing more.

“Harder,” I pleaded.

He wrapped a hand around my throat and our eyes connected as he slammed back into me.

“Ohhhh,” I whimpered, my eyes fluttering shut.

“Eyes on me when I fuck you, *amorina*,” he grunted, and my lids flickered open, meeting his onyx gaze. Fuck, I wouldn’t make it long if he kept talking like that.

He brought his lips to my neck, marking me. He held my hip with his other hand as he thrust into me over and over, his groans and my moans the perfect harmony.

“I can feel your greedy pussy taking my cock so good.” He released my throat, his hand reaching between our bodies before he moved his thumb over my clit. “So fucking perfect.” Thrust. “That’s my good girl.” Thrust. “All mine.”

The sound of flesh smacking against flesh filled the air. I was an incoherent mess, my pussy swollen and throbbing, juices trickling down my thighs. His pace increased, and he circled my swollen clit with abandon.

My muscles contracted around his shaft as another powerful orgasm washed over me.

“*Dio*, you’re *perfetta*,” he groaned, pounding me through my orgasm.

He came with a roar, spurting his cum inside me. I could feel his length twitching inside my throbbing pussy. My muscles quivered from the intensity, and I was certain I’d be walking funny for days.

He collapsed on the bed, then wrapped his arms around me, both of us trying to catch our breath. I sprawled on top of him, enjoying his protection and heat, while his hand swept up and down my back.

He pressed a tender kiss to my mouth.

“*Non ti lascerò mai*,” he murmured, his hand brushing across my cheek.

My brow furrowed. “What does that mean?”

His mouth curved wickedly as he sat up, his eyes falling to my thighs where his cum was smeared.

He reached out, ran a finger through it, and said, “Best sex ever.” Then he brought the same finger to my mouth.

“Ditto,” I agreed, parting my lips.

The salty taste of him flooded my tongue as I sucked his finger clean. This man had turned me inside out, and I feared he was quickly becoming my addiction.

But the look in his eyes—possessive and dark—told me I wasn’t alone.

“I should probably get going,” I muttered, suddenly uncomfortable with this moment of affection. Or maybe it was the expression on his face that

set me on edge. I didn't know what it was, but my usual instincts to run at the first sign of intimacy flared.

His arm tightened around me.

"Not yet," he murmured. "You're not sneaking out of here this time."

"There was no sneaking out last time." Seeing the knowing look in his eyes made me blush. "Besides, don't you have some mafia work to do?"

He chuckled. "And what do you know about the mafia?"

I shrugged. "Not much, but I know you don't get sick days."

He nudged my face toward his, pressing a kiss on my nose. "Well, I'm taking free time now. We're enjoying each other."

My eyebrow shot up. "Enjoying each other?"

"Sì."

I slid my hands around him. "You mean you want more sex."

He paused, his beautiful mouth tipping into a frown. "No, I mean I'm trying to get to know you. We don't *just* have to have sex."

I rolled my eyes. "Now I know you're shitting me."

"Athena, Italian men don't shit you." Okay, maybe things were getting lost in translation, but before I could think of a better explanation, he changed the subject.

"So, why romance novels?" he asked curiously.

"Huh?" My head was spinning. "What do you mean?"

"Why do you write romance novels? Why not thrillers or mysteries?" I narrowed my eyes on him and he sighed. "You told me last night that I'm your muse."

Ah, that checked out. Damn drunk honesty.

I shrugged, clearing my throat uncomfortably. "I don't know."

He studied me for a few heartbeats before answering. "Yes, you do."

I shook my head, trying to get rid of the strange urge to tell him what I'd never told anyone.

I cleared my throat. "You'll laugh."

"I swear on my life that I won't."

I sighed, locking eyes with him. "I love the idea of love."

His brows furrowed. "Explain." Then as if he remembered his manners, he added, "*Ti prego*."

"I really need to download Duolingo and start learning some basic Italian," I grumbled.

"Please," he translated.

Sliding out of his arms, I brought my knees to my chest and wrapped my hands around them. For a minute, maybe more, I stared out the window, focusing on the clear blue sky. He must have sensed I needed a moment, because he remained quiet, waiting patiently.

“I know I said last night that I believe love brings nothing but trouble and pain—yes, I *do* remember some of my drunken rambling—but the truth is... I’ve never been in love,” I finally admitted. “I’ve never seen it either. Well, except with Reina and Isla, but even then, it seems so... intangible. So, in order to experience it for myself, I write about it. Versions of how I envision being in love feels, I guess.” It seemed ridiculous now that I was saying it out loud. “I also read a lot of romance novels. It lets me feel all the emotions through thousands of different stories, breaking my heart only for it to be pieced back together with happily-ever-afters.” I let out a sardonic breath, flapping my hands in resignation. “I guess it’s my escape too. So there you have it.”

Silence stretched, his dark eyes pulling me into their depths. I couldn’t interpret the look in them, but something about it made my heart flip.

“Trust me, love exists.” He cupped my face, bringing our noses a breath apart.

I let out an uncomfortable laugh. “You Italians are such romantics, but I regret to inform you that it doesn’t. And anyway, weren’t you the one who said you’re terrified of losing the people you love? Why even bother going through all the pain and heartache.”

“Oh, *amorina*. That’s what I was trying to tell you about loving someone despite the pain. And I plan on showing you exactly what I mean.”

Then he crashed his mouth to mine and the world around us slipped away. I forgot about love and happily-ever-after in his arms.

At least for a moment.

TWENTY-TWO

ATHENA



My phone buzzed with a flurry of messages, and Manuel's name flashed across the screen.

Manuel: I'm still thinking about you.

Manuel: Miss you, amorina.

I rubbed my eyes while grinning like a fool. I hadn't seen him in four days, since our little rendezvous in his penthouse, but random messages like this continued pouring in.

I couldn't help the giddiness that came over me. The man was a charmer.

Me: Don't go all sweet on me. I'll miss my dirty talker.

Manuel: Next time I see you, be prepared to come while I'm licking your 😊.

Me: And here I thought I'd have to resort to begging and let you teabag me in order to get my dirty talker back.

Manuel: I'd rather have your pleasure. So I'm going to fuck you nice and slow until you beg me for release.

My lips parted and arousal shot through me. The man sure had a filthy mouth on him.

"Someone turn on the television," Raven shouted through the small apartment. I startled, quickly turning my phone off before dropping it into my lap. I couldn't have my girlfriends seeing these texts.

“Is the TV on yet?” Raven screamed.

Of course, neither Reina nor I moved from our spot on the couch with how accustomed we were to Raven’s bizarre outbursts. Phoenix was out on a date, so there were only three of us in the apartment. Reina was flipping through a fashion magazine, I was deep in the revision stage of my latest draft, and Raven was painting in her bedroom while a show played on her phone. She was big on multitasking.

Raven’s footsteps thundered as she ran across the apartment, frantically searching for the remote.

“It’s under the pillow,” Reina deadpanned, not bothering to lift her eyes. “Same place you always leave it.”

Raven and I exchanged a glance but let it be. Her engagement party was coming up, and with each passing day, she grew more tense.

“Athena’s on television.”

My brows dipped and I waved a hand around in the air. “Hello...? I’m sitting right here.”

She scoffed.

“Ha-ha, smartass. Your *books* are on television.” She kept pressing buttons, flipping through the channels once the television turned on.

“Get out, our plan actually worked?” Reina lifted her head.

“My plan worked,” Raven stated proudly. “You guys just helped with the execution.”

“There is no *I* in team,” Reina pointed out, smiling softly.

I jumped off the couch, barely catching my laptop before it hit the hardwood.

“Can you two discuss whose idea it was later?” I said, trying to grab the remote from Raven. “What channel? Quick!”

Once we found it, we all stared in amazement while my heart raced in my chest. The broadcaster was an enthusiastic woman with flushed cheeks and a wide smile on her face as she raved about the book.

Manhunting by A.K. Mystique has made chart-topping sales...

Hitting France Today’s bestselling list...

A thrilling page-turner with a generous helping of spice...

“Oh my gosh,” I whispered. “It’s my book. They sold every single copy we smuggled in there.”

“And they made quite a profit considering they got them for free,” Reina remarked.

Raven snorted. "Who cares? This is the push Athena needed."

The bookstores expect a waiting list of orders...

Set to arrive within the next two days...

Watch out, France, the women of Paris are manhunting...

The girls wrapped their arms around me as happy tears spilled over. We laughed and jumped around giddily.

"We have to celebrate," Raven announced. "We're long overdue for some good news. Let's get drunk."

We poured ourselves wine, clinked our glasses, and toasted. "Here's to smut, murder, and—"

Reina stopped and searched for the right word, so I chimed in, "And love."



Reina's engagement party was not a happy event, what with tension boiling among all the scowling men in attendance.

My little secret fling with Manuel and all the unknowns surrounding the Triads had me on edge. I hated keeping secrets from my friends, but they had full plates as it was. They didn't need my shit on top of their own.

I needed Manuel's protection. I'd be a fool, or incredibly aloof, to think that the recent attack was a one-off, but it was more than just that. His charm was impossible to resist, and I couldn't deny the burning chemistry. It pulled me further into its flames, and I was all too willing.

Rationally, I knew I didn't know him well enough to be thinking about the L word. Irrationally... I wanted to believe him when he promised me forever.

It made no fucking sense.

I'd never felt more at home or like myself with anyone else. The layers I'd kept tight around my heart were slowly melting away, leaving me stripped bare around him. The feeling ignited something dangerous and delicious inside of me.

Manuel had warned me when I left him the other day that I might have to go into hiding if his search for information kept coming up inconclusive. I'd resisted the idea but knew there was no way around it. After all, Mom

and I had to do the same thing when the Triads attacked us before, nearly burning me alive.

I tapped my chest to release some of the pressure weighing on it.

One thing was certain—I was beginning to trust Manuel. *Really* trust him. He continuously went out of his way to keep me safe, and somehow it felt like he understood me better than anyone.

I promised him that if the threat was still looming, I'd go into hiding after this party. I'd already made concessions when I accepted his insistence to have round-the-clock surveillance, and even though I was reluctant at first, I knew it was necessary.

Once we arrived at the venue for Reina's farce of an engagement party looking like circus freaks in our multicolored dresses, I finally relaxed. I took in the gleaming marble floors and the soaring ceilings adorned with sparkling chandeliers. The venue was very impressive, and unsurprisingly, it belonged to the Marchetti empire.

"It's an amazing space," I murmured to Raven, who looked bored to no end.

She shrugged, her gaze roaming. "I'm just ready for this shit show to be over with." She pointed to the bar. "Let's get a drink."

I felt a gaze burning a hole in my back and there was no question as to whose it was. I slowly turned around and met Manuel's dark stare, zeroed in on me.

My mouth went dry.

He looked gorgeous in his designer three-piece suit. His handsome face had a five-o'clock shadow and the edges of his mouth were curved slightly.

"You go ahead," I muttered to Raven who was already on her way to the bar. "I'll be there in a second."

Manuel closed the distance between us in less than five strides. His fingers wrapping around my wrist, he dragged me into an alcove and spun me around, pressing my back against the wall and bracing his hands on either side of my shoulders.

My breath hitched, the sounds from the party drowning against the drumming of my own heart.

He ghosted his lips up and down my neck as though he were drinking me in.

"You're coming home with me tonight," he murmured against my ear. His low, raspy voice sent a thrill through me before he nipped at the

sensitive spot beneath, running his tongue over it to ease the sting. “I’m going to fuck you into next week. You won’t be able to walk straight.”

I moaned, burying my fingers in his hair, as he pressed a kiss to my skin. I was ready to let him fuck me right here in this hallway, risking exposure. My heart thrashed in my chest, my nipples pressing hard and tight against the thin material of my ridiculous dress.

This reaction to him really was unhealthy.

Throwing caution to the wind, I tilted my head back and looked him straight in the eye.

“How about you give me a glimpse of that threat, *paparino*?” I asked, tilting my chin in challenge.

His scent surrounded me and I wanted so badly to lean into him. To kiss him and touch him. To let him own me.

As if he could read my thoughts, his lips crashed against mine, the flash of fire consuming me and flaming this craving. I arched into him as one of his hands left the wall and smoothed from my back to my ass, cupping it and jerking me toward him. I was pressed against the long, hard ridge in his pants, shamelessly rubbing against it.

A deep groan vibrated in his throat and he inched his hand down and gathered up my dress. Dragging it up my legs and bunching it in his hand, he slid his fingers underneath my lacy thong.

He pulled back, watching my face as his fingers brushed over my swollen, pulsing clit. I gasped and shuddered as he rolled his thumb over it. His pupils were dilated, hunger lurking in them. One long finger thrust into me and I cried out, but thankfully he covered my mouth with his own, muffling the desperate sound.

His fingers and thumb moved in tandem, and my hips rolled as I raced to find my release. Sparks shimmered behind my closed lids and I was panting, arching into him, my breasts brushing against his suit.

My movements were frantic and desperate as I shamelessly ground against his hand. I’d seen him less than a week ago, but it was on the tip of my tongue to tell him I missed him.

“Jesus, are all the corners taken in this joint?” I froze, hearing a male voice tainted with humor. “First Dante, now you. Maybe I should just stand in the middle of the reception hall.”

I blinked up at Manuel while agitation rolled off him in icy waves. His hand slowed, but he didn’t stop. The wall sconce to my left illuminated us

slightly, but still he angled his body so it was folded over mine, keeping me out of sight from curious onlookers.

“Get lost, Cesar,” he growled, “or I swear to God, I will shoot you.”

It took but a few seconds for my mind to piece together that the man interrupting us was Cesar, Dante Leone’s bodyguard. Embarrassment washed over me.

“Really original,” Cesar retorted, chuckling as he sauntered away.

But the moment was lost and Manuel growled, pulling his fingers from me. He reached up and brushed them over my lips before taking my mouth in another fierce kiss.

“I *always* make good on my threats,” he muttered into my ear. “Delicious.” He hummed in approval, licking my arousal from his fingers before he leaned toward me, his lips hovering over mine. “Nothing and no one will keep me from you anymore, *amorina*.”

My stomach swooped. And as he took my hand, leading me back to the main room, I knew I was in trouble.

TWENTY-THREE

MANUEL



Most of the Omertà was here, but all the attention was on the five women who were dressed in garments I imagined were designed to blind anyone who set eyes on them.

But that wasn't what was bothering me. It was the fact that Athena was wearing the tightest dress, letting several dozen leering eyes look at their fill of curves that belonged to me and only me.

And then there was fucking Cesar, who was grinning like a fucking idiot and even tried to fist-bump me. *Lo stupido.*

I opted for a glass of cognac from the bar, turning my back to him and forcing my pulse to slow as he chuckled merrily.

"Why do you look like someone ran over your mother's grave?" asked Enrico as he leaned back against the bar countertop.

"It's even worse," I gritted. "I really want to shoot a fucker, but this engagement is doomed enough without starting a war."

Enrico chuckled. "Glad to hear you're being reasonable."

A sardonic breath left me and I said in a tone full of sarcasm, "I live for your approval."

"Danil Popov called," he said, switching to an Italian dialect that was usually hard for people to follow.

"Shipment?" I inquired, knowing full well that we only stayed in contact to keep an eye on him and Soren. Keep your friends close but your enemies closer and all that.

"There seems to be an issue with it."

I pinched my nose. "I'm surprised. The man is usually annoyingly efficient."

"Are you in a bad mood again?" he teased, and I shot him a warning look. "You'll be getting your bride soon, so that should make you happy."

I turned my head, narrowing my eyes on him. "Are you aiming to be on my shit list?"

"Always, *zio mio*. I never imagined it would be so much fun. Payback is a bitch." Indeed it was. "Anyhow, back to the shipment. Want me to handle it?"

I was so tense it would have probably been smarter to let Enrico handle it, but I needed to blow off some steam.

"I'll do it," I told him. "Are we going to continue buying shit from Danil Popov?"

He shrugged. "I want to feel him out for a bit longer."

I scoffed. "Your wife won't appreciate your hands on anyone else."

He chuckled. "Isla will never have to worry about that."

Neither of us believed in cheating. Otherwise, what was the point of getting married? I froze, the question generating an answer I never thought I'd considered.

I returned my attention to Athena, squeezing the glass in my hand. She was standing at a tall round table, Phoenix Romero and Tatiana Nikolaev on her right, Isla and Raven on her left.

Tatiana's husband was a few paces behind her, watching over the crowd and talking to Boris, one of his men. She flicked him a glance every so often until she finally walked over to him, wrapping her hands around his neck and smiling as he whispered something in her ear.

I shook my head.

Now I'd seen it all. Illias Konstantin whispering sweet nothings to his wife.

A waiter came up to Athena, smiling widely, and offered her a drink. My grip on the glass in my hand tightened. Raven and Isla giggled. Athena flashed him a reserved smile and the waiter said something, and I watched as she followed his gaze to Cesar. The waiter walked away while Athena stared at Cesar with a gaping mouth, her cheeks crimson even under the dim light of the venue.

Then Cesar raised his own glass, saluting her.

Did that little shit dare send my woman a drink? The glass in my hand cracked and I saw red. Yeah, if I didn't get out of here and handle this Popov shit, I was going to burst with tension.

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TWENTY-FOUR MANUEL



I parked my G-Class Mercedes Benz and walked inside the warehouse where our men were unloading the crates.

Danil Popov was leaning against the wall, one foot propped against the wall as he typed on his phone. Two of his men stood next to him, the infamous Soren with the gruesome scar slashed across his face being one of them, while the other stood near the crates, arguing with Umbrio, my right-hand man, and one of his helpers.

I tilted my chin toward the crates left on the truck. “What happened with the shipment?”

“One of my men fucked up,” Danil said, meeting my gaze. “Don’t worry, he’s dead.”

“Hopefully not his first fuckup.”

The dry look he gave me told me that Danil didn’t give second chances.

“Do you extend the same treatment to family members who fuck up?” I asked dryly.

“Sometimes.”

In Italian families, business was important, but family was even more so. I didn’t think Danil stuck to the same code. It was a good insight into the Popov family.

If it were up to me, Athena would never cross paths with her half-siblings or father. Her mother might be an idiot, but the Popovs were cruel motherfuckers.

“How many crates are messed up?” I asked.

The sooner I got this done, the sooner I could get back to the party and leave Paris with Athena.

“Four. I’ll have the replacement ammunition within two weeks.”

I looked back at Umbrio who usually handled our arms shipments. “When did we promise to deliver these to our customer?”

“On Friday.”

I turned back to Danil. “I need the correct ammo in five days.”

To his credit, he didn’t even flinch, his cold blue eyes studying me.

“Fine, five days it is.” I nodded and turned to leave when his next words stopped me. “Athena Kosta, do you know her?”

I forced a neutral expression on my face. “What makes you think I do?”

Danil shrugged, returning his attention to his cell phone and appearing unbothered. I knew it was a mask. “Isn’t she friends with Isla Marchetti, the new member of your tight-knit family?”

The muscle twitching in his jaw told me he was more attuned to this conversation than whatever he was typing on his phone.

“Hard to tell,” I drawled just as my phone rang. “She has many friends.”

He raised his head, assessing me. The look on his face let me know he was annoyed. But the Marchettis didn’t dance to the Popovs’ tunes and we never would.

“I’ll be seeing you around,” he stated confidently as I pulled my keys from my pocket, making my way out of the warehouse. My phone rang persistently, showing Enrico’s name. Maybe he needed assurance that I didn’t kill Danil. I let the phone ring as I got behind the wheel and threw it onto the passenger seat.

I’d catch up with him later. Right now, I was on my way to teach a certain smartass Italian a lesson.

TWENTY-FIVE

MANUEL



“Next time you send my woman a drink, I’ll kill you. Slowly. Painfully,” I growled as soon as Cesar opened the door of the Leone club where the young fuckers usually hung out.

It’d been a long fucking night, starting with the engagement party that resulted in a missing fiancée. Amon Leone had probably kidnapped Reina, and who in the fuck knew what Dante would do as a result of it.

Cesar leaned an arm against the doorframe, rubbing a hand across his mouth and fighting off a grin.

“Not sure I know what you’re talking about,” he drawled, apparently giving up as he flashed me a full-blown grin. “After the rather boring engagement, where I minded my business, I left and decided to get some work done at this club. No drinks were sent to *your* woman.”

“Bullshit.”

“Care to elaborate?”

My voice was cold, but I let it warm around the edges suggestively when I said, “How about I find a way to make it crystal fucking clear by delivering your head in a box to the Leones.”

“Was your name tattooed on her forehead? No, sir, it was not.” The balls on this guy. “I didn’t see your ring on her finger,” he drawled. “Hence, I didn’t send anything to *your* woman. As far as I know, Athena is out for grabs.”

“The fuck she is. Touch her and you’re dead.”

His eyes flashed dangerously, but it didn't matter because he'd never beat me. My experience trumped his youth and impulsiveness. He'd be dead before he could blink.

"You know, if anyone else threatened to kill me, I'd gut them before they could draw their next breath. But since I know you and you're naturally grouchy, I'll let it slide. You can't help it; you're head over heels for the beautiful Greek."

In all my forty-five years, I had never made threats in the name of a woman. Never felt this fierce protectiveness either. Then again, when it came to Athena, I wasn't reacting like my usual self.

"Unless you're not interested and she's available for—"

Irritation unfurled in my chest and my hand twitched to reach for the gun in my holster. Before he could finish that statement, I gritted, "Get this through your thick skull: she's unavailable to you and anyone else."

He let out an amused breath, crossing his arms. "Does she know she's yours?"

"That's none of your business."

"You should know, that group of friends... they are one major headache."

"I have *grappa* and aspirin for that," I bit out, fire burning in my blood. That woman was so deep under my skin, not even laser surgery could get her out. "So don't worry yourself and all fifty personalities of yours about Athena and my headaches."

I needed to get Athena out of France and to my castello in Italy. I'd tie her to my bed and make her come over and over again until she was too wrung out to even think about any other man.

A smug expression passed Cesar's sharp features. "We'll be expecting a wedding invitation soon."

Marrying Athena sounded better and better with each passing day. I blamed Enrico for planting that fucking seed. At this point, it was an arrangement I was seriously considering. If I made her mine, the world would know that she was off-limits and under the protection of the Marchetti name.

I adjusted my cuff links. "Don't fuck with me again, Cesar, or you'll see how I deal with assholes who piss me off. *Capisce?*"

One corner of his lips lifted. "Loud and clear." I nodded and turned to leave at the same time he added, "Such a shame though. I hear Greek

women are *wild*, even more so than Italians.”

Fuck it. “One last thing.”

“Yeah?”

I pulled my arm back and punched the smirk right off the fucker’s face. Cesar wiped the blood off his bottom lip, tipping his head back and laughing like a fucking madman.

“One day I’ll get even,” he stated, his eyes lit with amusement.

But it wouldn’t be today.

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TWENTY-SIX

ATHENA



It was nearly one o'clock in the morning when I heard a faint thud.

I sat up in my bed and closed the book in my hand, listening. Just as I was about to chalk it up to my roommates, I heard it again, but this time it came from the window.

"Manuel?" I whispered, my brows pulling together. I expected him to sweep me away after the engagement party and was surprised when he left abruptly and hadn't come to fetch me yet.

I was almost... disappointed.

But deep down I knew I was being stupid—the idea that it was Manuel at my window was certainly yet another one of my delusional fantasies. Like some pathetic version of Romeo and Juliet. The man didn't climb windows; he picked locks and walked straight in.

I gave my head a subtle shake and dropped the book on my bed, sliding onto the cool floor and padding over to the window, my heart ricocheting in my chest.

I stood there, squinting into the night, and internally cursed for not seeing well in the dark. I could only make out shadows.

I was peering through the slightly foggy glass when I froze. There were men out there. Several of them.

My blood turned to ice.

If I had any chance of getting out of this alive, I'd need to have my wits about me. I couldn't believe the Triads were breaking into my room. Again.

They really had to work on their creativity. You'd think they could come up with something original.

I headed for my cell phone that sat on the nightstand, but by the time I got there, a crash sounded. I whirled around and three masked men had barged into my room holding swords. Fucking swords, like it was a goddamned ninja movie.

I have to run. Shit, where are the girls?

If I could lead them away, the girls wouldn't be in danger. Should I scream for them, or would that put them in danger? And Phoenix... Fuck, she'd never hear me. Maybe I should grab them and run.

I could only hope Manuel's guard would be there to rescue us because we didn't have a shot in hell of taking on three trained men. *Giants*, by the looks of them.

I was about to make a break for my bedroom door when one of the men waved his sword.

"I wouldn't recommend it." His sword sliced into my nightstand, breaking it in half.

Am I going to die? The thought echoed while my heart screamed I wasn't ready. My heart punching my rib cage, I remained frozen, staring at them while every instinct screamed at me to run and hide.

It was like someone had pressed pause on my life, and all I could do was watch these masked men prepare to slice me with their swords, ending my life that had barely begun.

The whole scene felt surreal, and I half-expected Raven to rush in here and wake me up from this nightmare. Yet, nobody came. Did she and Phoenix leave after Isla and her family dropped us off? I hoped so—for their sake.

I watched as one man stalked toward me, his eyes lit with anger, and all I could do was stare, my feet glued to the floor.

The masked man neared.

One step. Two. Three.

My life flashed before my eyes. Those years with my mom, traveling the world from stage to stage. Our morning swims in the Aegean Sea. Our years in the States when we'd devour burgers and ice cream while watching silly rom-coms. She'd tell me it was all a fairy tale; I would tell her that I wanted to be the princess in those happily-ever-afters and she'd smile with a sad look in her eyes.

Those were the things that had shaped me. Small events that all added up into something big, something *important*.

Pressure squeezed the oxygen from my lungs, threatening to suffocate me right here and right now.

He was in front of me, the cold blade of his sword against my neck. The hate gleaming in his dark eyes had me reeling back.

“Twenty-three years.” His hot breath fanned across my face, making my stomach lurch. My eyes locked on the familiar tattoo on his hand, right between his thumb and index finger. “After twenty-three years, I finally get to avenge her death.”

“Her?”

“That’s right.”

My brows scrunched. I was unable to look away from this monster.

Who? I wanted to ask, but I couldn’t find my voice. I knew one wrong word could cost me my life.

“She was promised to me, and your filthy existence took her away from me.”

“Stop talking, you idiot,” the other masked man spat, his voice tense. “She was my baby sister, you never even met her. Now shut the hell up and grab her so we can get the fuck out.”

The drumming of my heart reached a fever pitch, and before I could form another thought, my world turned pitch black.

TWENTY-SEVEN

MANUEL



I knew something was wrong as soon as I pulled up to the building and spied my men lying dead in the alley.

I threw my door open and jumped out, rushing into the building and taking the steps two at a time. I didn't bother with picking the lock. Instead, I pulled out my gun, screwed on the silencer, a soft *pop* sound, and a bullet had pierced through the lock, the door falling open.

I rushed through the dark, empty apartment. It was mere hours ago that we dropped off the women here. Where were they all? I continued in the direction of Athena's room and stopped short.

My beautiful girl lay unconscious as a masked man was in the process of restraining her, taking no care of her limp body. He jerked her back and forth, her head repeatedly hitting the hardwood.

A red mist coated my vision.

I couldn't think, the anger so swift and so violent that I rushed into the room with a roar. I went berserk, hell-bent on destroying everything in my path. *Porca puttana!* I'd make these assholes regret ever setting their sights on her.

"Touch her again, and I'll skin you alive."

The men jerked, but before they could react, I shot the first masked guy in the head. A string of Chinese curses followed, telling me these were Triads. In the distance, I heard a car revving, but I focused on the immediate danger.

I prowled forward, my gun remaining trained on the fuckers.

“Put down your swords or I will shoot. Right fucking now!”

One of the men grabbed Athena by her throat, dragging her limp body off the floor.

I pulled the trigger, hitting the masked man in the chest. But the fucker must have been wearing a bulletproof vest because he barely staggered back. I aimed for the second guy and took my shot. Blood splattered from his arm.

The man who seemed to be the leader issued an order: “Pull out.”

I took another shot, piercing straight through the leg of the man dragging Athena’s body. Another roar filled the space.

“You’re not taking her with you,” I gritted.

The masked men shared a wordless exchange and turned as one, jumping out of the window and into the dark night.

Adrenaline pumping, I rushed across the room before dropping to my knees in front of Athena’s slumped body.

Still gripping the gun, not trusting the Triads wouldn’t come back, I cradled her face.

“*Amorina...* wake up.” To my relief, her eyes fluttered open, and I released a breath I’d been holding since I arrived and found my worst nightmare unfolding.

Athena

A familiar voice pulled me from unconsciousness. When I opened my eyes, I saw broad shoulders and a wide chest, packaged in a three-piece Brioni suit. And then recognition slowly sunk in as I met the dark gaze full of worry staring at me.

“*Dio mio*, I almost had a heart attack.”

He leaned closer, his scent filling my lungs, and I inhaled greedily. “At your age, it’s not improbable.”

The edge of his mouth lifted slightly. “I am glad to see you still have your sense of humor.”

I let out a soft snort. “Those ninjas didn’t break my spirit the last time and they certainly won’t crush it this time.”

He dragged the back of his knuckles across my cheek. “Okay, *amorina*, we have to get the fuck out of here.”

I shook my head. “Raven and Phoenix. I want to check their rooms.” His brows furrowed and alert shot through me. “What? Did they get hurt? Phoenix can’t hear and—”

He pressed his mouth against mine to silence me. “Nobody’s in this apartment.”

Relief slammed into me. “Really?”

“Yes.” It was the best outcome I could have hoped for. He tucked his pistol into his waistband at the small of his back, then as if he didn’t even have me in his arms, he stood up effortlessly. “I’ll show you.”

And sure as fuck, I was the only one in the little apartment that had seen years of mischief, laughter, heartbreaks, secrets, and a friendship that would forever bind us together.

“I never thought I’d be happy to say that I’m glad those two aren’t here,” I murmured. “Although, I wonder where they went? We came back together, and then we all went to our rooms after the stupid engagement party.”

Manuel shrugged. “Who knows, but it’s probably for the best that they aren’t here.”

I met his gaze. “Why are you carrying me?”

“You just had a traumatic experience and—”

I let out an exasperated breath, wiggling out of his grip. “I’m all better now. Put me down.” I refused to be a weakling, clinging to her man. *My man*. Shit, that sounded perfect.

“No.”

I shoved at him.

“Manuel, put me down.” His gaze cut to me and we stared at each other for several beats. My mouth dried as the familiar tug between us roared to life, but I stood firm. “Please.”

“We’re leaving this place.”

I wasn’t stupid enough to argue that very valid idea with him. I knew when it was time to throw in the towel.

“Okay,” I conceded. “But I’m walking out of here.”

He must have considered his options, because he finally gave me a lopsided grin that would melt the hardest of hearts.

He squeezed my hand, warming my chest. “I’ll be right by your side the whole time, *amorina*.”

I couldn’t help but return the gesture with a soft smile of my own.

“Just admit it, *paparino*, you like holding my hand.”

His expression turned predatory, much like a wolf poised to devour me.

“Damn right I do, and I want the whole world to know it.” His gaze glittered darkly, promising sinful things that had my heart tripping over itself.

I rushed back into my room, grabbed a bag, and shoved a few essentials into it. I scanned my space one last time and felt a wave of exasperation wash over me at the sight of the shattered bedside table. As if on cue, Manuel appeared at my shoulder and seemed to understand, because he proceeded to gather up the pieces of wood and tuck them deep into my closet. Then, he threw my bag over his shoulder, and we walked out of the tiny apartment.

As we stepped out onto the sidewalk, we ran into my half brother, Danil Popov. The photos I’d seen didn’t do him any justice. He wore beige linen pants and a tight T-shirt, managing to look both sophisticated and non-threatening. Although Danil Popov was handsome in his own right, there was an element of authority and danger emanating from him.

He stood next to a man, likely his bodyguard, considering he was huge and had a gun poking out from under his jacket. He wore a dark suit and stood like a brick wall. The man’s scar running from his left temple down to his jaw did nothing to mar his gorgeous features.

“Well, well, well, what have we got here?” was my half brother’s greeting while every fiber of my being reeled with shock.

I never thought I’d meet my half brother or any of his family. In fact, I didn’t want to meet them, perfectly fine never to cross paths with them. However, it would seem destiny wasn’t as kind because it threw him in my path.

“What are you doing here?” I blurted, but they all ignored me. Danil’s gaze was locked on Manuel.

“I asked you a question, Marchetti.”

Manuel’s face hardened into a scary expression, one I’d never seen before, even when he learned who my mother was.

“Watch it, Popov, or you might find yourself without a territory.”

Yikes.

The moment stretched as they glared at each other. “And that’s my thanks for clearing out the bodies—your men—off the street.”

My brows furrowed, not following the meaning.

“Nobody fucking asked you to, Popov.”

Cold fury rolled in waves, clashing between the two men. The silence stretched, and I held my breath until Danil’s eyes darted to me.

“You weren’t supposed to get pulled into this fucked-up mafia world, Athena Kosta. Alexandra should’ve done a better job at keeping you safe.”

I stilled.

He knew my name. Did he know I was his sister? And how did he know Alexandra was my mother? As far as I knew, she’d kept me a secret from the world.

However, there was one thing that was clear by my half brother’s tone: he didn’t like my mother.

Maybe he hated me, too. Could he be behind what just happened with the masked men? Anger burned in my chest at the suggestion of such a betrayal.

Don’t jump to conclusions.

“What do you mean?” I breathed, something familiar about his words. My skin prickled as silence stretched. Danil gave his head a subtle shake, then returned his eyes to Manuel, but I wasn’t having it. Taking a step forward, refusing to shy away from his towering frame, I repeated, “I asked you a question.”

Danil moved, stepping closer, but Manuel was quicker. He had his gun pointed at my half brother.

To my surprise, Danil seemed amused rather than angry. “You’re brave, Athena. That’s good. You’ll need it.”

My brow furrowed at the odd comment. “Why?”

Again, he ignored me and flicked a cold glance at Manuel. “Unless you’re prepared to shoot me, I suggest you put that gun away.”

Manuel stiffened, fury and power emanating off him, and suddenly the mood turned arctic. I feared there’d be a full-blown shootout right here and now if we didn’t leave.

“Excuse us, gentlemen.” I flashed them a polite smile, squeezing Manuel’s hand. It gave me the courage I needed. I wasn’t a fool to think they weren’t capable of raining terror down on us—siblings or not. The hard, dangerous gleam in their eyes set me on edge.

“I do love it when I’m proven right, Manuel,” Danil drawled, his tone cold. “I thought you didn’t know Athena Kosta.”

Wait, what? Danil Popov was asking Manuel about me. What was that about?

“Danil. Soren.” He dipped his chin at both men. “As nice as it is to see you, it’s time we left.” It was clear by Manuel’s tone that it wasn’t a pleasant run-in at all.

“We’re not done here. I want to know why you weren’t honest with me earlier,” Danil said, running his tongue across his teeth as though agitated.

But before Manuel could respond, I chimed in. “Manuel and I matched on Tinder. We were about to grab a late dinner until you two rudely interrupted us.”

It was so random and far-fetched that I almost expected everyone to start laughing. They didn’t, but their expressions clearly indicated they thought I was full of shit.

“What a remarkable coincidence,” Danil deadpanned. “The same night I inquired about you, a Tinder match was made. Maybe I should give Tinder a try.” His voice was dark and mocking. “What do you think, Soren?”

The man snickered. “Probably won’t help you.”

Okay, maybe he wasn’t his bodyguard because I don’t think he’d talk to him that way. Not that I knew how guards usually behaved, but the men Manuel assigned to me acted as silent shadows.

I smiled sweetly. “I’m afraid your friend’s right. Don’t bother, something tells me you’d be unmatchable.” Soren rubbed a hand across his mouth, fighting off a grin. “Now, if you’ll excuse us.”

Danil’s eyes flashed, letting out an amused breath. “I’m not done.”

I didn’t want to spend another minute around this man or wait for the Triads to catch up to us.

“But we are. Now move out of the way.”

Manuel turned to Danil. “You heard my woman. Now get out of our way before I shoot you.”

My woman.

I chanced a smile. This man was giving me so much book material.

We sidestepped him and I waved. “*Ciao.*”

I pushed my shoulders back and walked next to Manuel as we made our way to his car, all while my mind ran through a dozen different thoughts. What was Danil doing here, and was it a coincidence an attempt was just made on my life?

Once we were in the car, he gave me his full attention. “Tinder, huh?”

I shrugged. "It's original if nothing else." I turned my face to look at his profile. "By the way, where are those bodyguards you assigned?"

He ignored my question and instead focused on the topic of Danil. "You know Danil is your half brother."

Not willing to let my original query go, I asked again, "Manuel, where are the bodyguards?"

I suspected I knew the answer. It had to be what Danil was referring to when he mentioned cleaning up the bodies. "The Triads got to them."

I had never met them, but the responsibility I felt still weighed heavy on my chest. "Did... did either of them have a family?"

He flicked me a look. "I'll take care of their families." It didn't make the guilt go away, but it made it a tiny bit better. "Now my turn, you know Danil Popov and his relations to you."

I pursed my lips. "I know of him. I've never met him." A memory flickered in the back of my mind but refused to come forward. Then I narrowed my eyes on him. "And how do *you* know?"

He turned in his seat to face me fully, his eyes suddenly more serious and tender than ever. "I have been very interested in all things to do with you since you left my bed on our first night together." I shook my head, not following whatever he was trying to say. "It's not in my nature to leave a single stone unturned."

At a loss for words, I just stared at him, and he flashed me a handsome grin.

"This must be a first. My *amorina* is speechless," he drawled, putting his car into drive.

"I'm not," I protested, not sure what to think of his admission. My reason warned he was acting like an obsessed stalker. My stupid heart leaned into it. Yeah... that was definitely concerning. "Where are we going?" I asked, not yet ready to deal with my warring emotions.

"We're taking a drive. It's about fifteen hours away, and it's somewhere I can guarantee your safety."

I reached for my phone, wanting to check if Raven and Phoenix were okay. I typed a quick message to the girls.

Is everyone okay? I'm good but have to disappear for a bit.

Then his statement sunk in and I frowned. "Why wouldn't we take a plane? It's faster."

“Because that’s what’s expected. You’ve been through enough today.
Leave the rest to me.”

Well, it seemed Manuel thought of everything.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

MANUEL



“We’re going to see a doctor first,” I told Athena as she slumped back into her seat. Her pale complexion didn’t escape me, and I worried she might have suffered from a concussion.

I couldn’t help but be furious at myself for letting her return to her apartment—alone—after Reina’s engagement party. If I hadn’t gone to see Cesar to prove a goddamn point, she would’ve been safe in my arms. Truthfully, I should have taken her away the first time the Triads came for her. If I had, they wouldn’t have hurt her. I had no idea what she suffered at their hands before I got there. I needed to find out what happened during that whole incident—and then I’d take her to my castle and I’d hunt them all down.

But first I’d ensure she was comfortable and taken care of. I examined her as best I could and found no bruises or cuts, but that didn’t eliminate internal damage.

My blood simmered again at the thought.

The engine hummed and she sighed as she made herself comfortable on the seat and turned so she could see me, tucking a hand under her cheek.

“Stop letting your imagination run wild,” she muttered.

“I’ll have a doctor examine you. Case closed.” I cleared my throat. My adrenaline was still spiked from the attack, and concern for her clouded my brain.

I knew full well that Athena made me vulnerable. And no matter what we told Danil, now he knew it too. That's why I needed her close, until I could ensure her safety.

"They roughed me up a bit, but I promise you, I'm okay," she retorted. "Don't worry, I'm still up for sex."

I let out a sardonic breath.

"I do love your humor," I said, a spark in her eyes flaring to life. "The days are long without you."

"You *just* saw me."

"And we had to sneak around. No more hiding this," I gritted, grinding my back teeth together. "I'm too old for that shit."

She rolled her eyes. "You're not *that* old."

"Old enough to make you see a doctor one way or the other," I leaned in to say, pecking her cheek.

Her eyes flashed.

"It's in your best interest not to mistake me for an obedient woman, Manuel." I returned my eyes to the road, driving but she leaned over the center console, her teeth coming to my neck. "In fact, any man who thinks he can boss me around will be sorely disappointed."

And then she bit me, marking me as hers.

Game. Set. Match. Fuck, I was gone for this woman.

But nonetheless, I would win this battle of wills.

Reaching out with my free hand, I gripped her nape. "I agree, *amorina*. I'd be an idiot not to acknowledge your strength, especially after what happened tonight, but this is your health we're talking about. I won't negotiate when it comes to your well-being."

Two heartbeats passed and she sighed.

"Fine, doctor it is."

I rewarded her with a quick peck on her mouth. "I knew you'd come around."

I pulled out my phone and dialed the doctor. "Be ready for us in thirty minutes," I told him, and then I hung up before he could respond.

While I drove to the doctor's secret location, my thoughts drifted to Danil. Running into him in front of Athena's apartment was unexpected. Did he know she was his half sister? Was he working with his father? I didn't trust Atticus; he was in the habit of stabbing his allies in the back, but

from everything I'd heard, Danil took his role as the head of the Balkan mafia seriously. He was a fair businessman.

However, I wasn't willing to test that theory with Athena's life.

Between the Triads and Danil, the risk was too great that someone didn't have her best interest at heart. The former had dared to touch my woman, and the latter was too secretive about his intentions.

And then there was the issue of Alexandra.

My gut warned me she was at the center of it all, along with Atticus's screw-up when he decided to fuck Lykos over, knowing he didn't tolerate human trafficking. But why was Athena the one in the firing line and not her mother?

Cazzo, none of it made sense.

Glancing over at Athena, I found her fast asleep. She looked exhausted, but still somehow glowing. I wanted her so badly that my teeth ached with it.

Returning my eyes to the road, I dialed up Enrico.

He answered on the third ring. "Sì?"

"Did I wake you?"

"Little too late to be concerned about that, don't you think?"

I let out a sardonic breath. "Payback for all the times you've woken me up."

"*Che è successo?*" What happened?

I took a deep breath before responding in Italian. "The Triads attacked Athena again."

"They're really going after her," he pointed out the obvious. "Where did it happen?"

"In her apartment again. Then, to make matters worse, when we were leaving, I ran into Danil Popov and his shadow, Soren."

He let out a string of curses before responding. "Is she okay?"

"Sì, but I'm taking her to the doctor just to be sure." I tapped my fingers on my knee. "I need a favor."

"*Dimmi.*" Tell me.

Whenever he needed help, whatever it was, I was there for him and vice versa. We were family and friends. We always had each other's backs.

"Can you see if you can extract any more information from Lykos? I need to know what I'm dealing with here. Why is Danil interested in Athena? Why are the Triads being so relentless?"

“I’ll reach out to him first thing,” my nephew said.

“Keep me updated,” I said, not caring that he could hear how crazy I was for this woman. “Whatever he wants, make sure he considers it done.”

I intended to protect Athena with all I had. I was done fighting the depth of my feelings for her. Instead, I’d make sure every threat she faced was eliminated.

“I’m glad you found someone,” Enrico said after a few heartbeats of silence. “It’s about fucking time.”

I chuckled softly, careful not to wake my passenger. “I don’t think she’d agree. She views it as a fling.”

“She’ll learn soon enough,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“She will.” I’d show her what a future with me could look like. How happy I could make her. “I’ll talk to you later.”

I ended the call and continued driving, making my way out of the city. I shifted in my seat and tried to concentrate on tonight.

When we finally arrived at the compound, I opened the door for Athena and guided her to her feet. She didn’t speak, her movements sluggish, as she placed her hand in mine and followed wearily.

TWENTY-NINE

ATHENA



Manuel was guiding me through the parking lot toward a building that looked like an apartment building. When I tripped over my feet—fatigue taking its toll—he scooped me up and carried me into the building.

His warmth felt good, surrounding me. Being close to him, smelling him. So manly, so hot. There was safety in his strong arms, and although I loved it, it did slightly annoy me. Up until now, no guy had ever fascinated me enough to want to do anything beyond a whirlwind romance, but here this man was, infiltrating my thoughts and barreling through my defenses. The man was a walking aphrodisiac.

He started climbing the stairs, and once he reached the top, he turned left and made his way down the dark hallway.

“Where are we going? This doesn’t look like a doctor’s office.”

“It is.” Just as he said it, he shoved a door open with his shoulder.

An older man with a full head of gray hair was seated at the desk, and the moment we entered, he stood up.

“*Buona sera*, Manuel.”

Manuel nodded.

“*Ciao, Dottore.*” He carefully placed me on his examination table, then shook hands with the doctor. He tilted his chin at me. “This is Athena. Thank you for seeing us on such short notice. There was an accident and she hit her head, among other things.”

Somehow I didn't think the poor doctor had a choice in seeing us on such "short notice." Manuel exchanged a few more words with the doctor while my head darted back and forth between them, not understanding a word.

He clapped the doctor on the shoulder and said to me, "Dr. Alleghri will look you over. All right?"

I nodded, and the doctor shifted his attention to me with a good-natured expression.

"*Signorina*," the man said, his black medical bag on the table next to the examination bed. "With your permission, I'd like to do a quick examination."

He slipped on a pair of latex gloves, then opened his bag to retrieve his instruments. He listened to my heartbeat, took my blood pressure, and asked me questions.

"Does your head hurt?"

"No."

"Are you feeling dizzy?"

"No."

"How have you been feeling in general, before the accident?"

Tired as fuck. Writing, breaking into bookstores, being attacked, having sex with an incredibly hot Italian. Although, I didn't think the good old doctor would appreciate my honesty.

"Tired, but I've been super busy," I ended up answering with a bit of a snort.

He nodded once, then continued using his stethoscope.

"Hmmm," he hummed. He exchanged a curious look with Manuel, then turned back at me with a speculative look. "Any chance of a pregnancy?"

I stiffened and my stomach dropped while I mentally scrambled to recall the date of my last period. I racked my brain... How long had it been? Was it before I met Manuel?

"I'm on birth control," I whispered as a terrible realization settled like lead in the pit of my stomach. I reached for my phone, my heart racing in my chest as I looked back through my calendar.

Oh my God.

No, no, no. It was impossible to be pregnant. I'd had my shot... Oh. My. God. I missed my last appointment. *Shit, shit, shit.* My periods were always irregular; sometimes I went months without getting it.

My stomach dropped. It couldn't be. The shot had never failed me. Plus I always used a condom.

Except with Manuel.

Shit, shit, *shit*. With everything going on, I hadn't even thought about the morning-after pill. Never even crossed my mind to ask Manuel to use a condom.

"It's impossible." I shook my head. This couldn't happen to me. For Christ's sake, I was always so careful, not wanting to repeat my mother's mistake.

The doctor shuffled around in a cabinet and brought a new device to my belly.

My brows furrowed. "What are you doing?"

He smiled gently. "Listening."

My gaze flitted to Manuel who seemed just as speechless, but then the doctor's next words had the whole world fading away.

"I can't hear anything, but let's get you a pregnancy test for peace of mind."

I opened my mouth, then paused, every limb freezing. Panic started building in my chest, but I forced it down. Things were going to be okay. I wasn't pregnant.

No vomiting. Check.

No nausea. Check.

No period. Goddammit, I wish it wasn't a check.

"Miss, have you been feeling nauseous?" the doctor asked softly again, pulling me out of a whirlwind of thoughts.

I swallowed. "No."

"We can take your urine sample right now and I'll be able to tell you for certain whether you're pregnant or not."

"I don't want to know," I breathed, on the verge of hysteria.

Manuel closed the distance, taking my hand in his. "We need to know."

I closed my eyes, praying I'd wake up from this nightmare. Unfortunately, when I opened my eyes, nothing had changed. This was very much my reality.

Sliding off the exam table, I headed for the bathroom. When Manuel was about to follow me, I shot him a glare. "I can do this on my own."

"Just leave a sample on the counter," the doctor said and I disappeared into the bathroom.

With a trembling heart, I peed into a cup, then cleaned up, and exited the bathroom. Two sets of dark eyes locked in on me and I offered them a shaky smile.

“All yours,” I mumbled to the doctor.

“Excellent,” he agreed. “May I also draw your blood?”

I sat back on the exam table. Extending my arm out, I gave the old doctor permission to draw my blood. He was efficient, disappearing into the bathroom right after, while I sat and twisted my hands nervously.

Manuel took my chin between his strong fingers, his expression serious. “Whatever the result, we’ll work it out.”

I shook my head. “I’m not ready for babies. Not now.”

“Why not?”

I pressed my fingers against my temples. “Oh, I don’t know. It might have something to do with the fact I have actual assassins after me.” I was on the verge of hyperventilating. “I’m only twenty-three, Manuel. Way too young for babies. I’ve never even changed a diaper.”

He made a dismissive sound, but before he could say something, the doctor returned. He looked at Manuel, then me, giving us a soft smile that I always thought fathers gave their daughters when faced with bad news.

“Let me be the first one to congratulate you.” I tried to control my breathing and tune out his words. If I didn’t hear them, it wasn’t real. Yet, deep down, I fucking knew it was. “The urine test confirmed it. You’re definitely pregnant. I suspect the blood test will confirm the same, but it will take some time to get results back. I’m guessing you’re about six weeks, but you’ll need to schedule a sonogram to confirm and determine all the details like measurements because I don’t have the equipment for that.”

Six weeks. Oh God—Manuel knocked me up on the first try. Who could do that?

I couldn’t help it—I burst into tears. Pulling my knees to my chest, I buried my face in my hands and cried. In the far corner of my mind, I heard footsteps, a soft click of the door, and then strong hands were wrapping around me. Manuel’s comforting scent surrounded me as his hand stroked my back.

How could I be so stupid?

I’d seen and experienced firsthand what it was like to be raised by a young, single mother. Now I was just like her, stupid enough to get knocked up by a mafia man.

Tears began streaming down my face, soaking Manuel's shirt. I couldn't look at him, shame filling me at being so damn stupid.

"This is all your fault," I choked out through my tears, knowing full well the part I'd played too.

Manuel kissed my forehead, then tilted my chin so he could see my face, his dark eyes boring into mine.

"It takes two," he echoed my own thoughts. "I'm not going to lie to you and say this makes me unhappy."

"Surely you don't mean that," I snapped, anger flaring in my chest. "If you hadn't brought me to see the doctor. If we never came here—" I dropped my head in my hands. "Fuck!"

Sighing, Manuel scooped me up and placed me on his lap, the examination table squeaking under his weight as he sat.

His hand came to rest on my belly, his touch gentle, almost reverent. "This is a good thing, *amorina*."

"No, it's not." I glared at him. "I have all these people after me. I can't bring a baby into all this."

His expression turned stormy but his voice portrayed none of it.

"It is a good thing. A baby is a blessing." I gave him an incredulous look. "We'll get married and keep our baby protected. It happens every day." My mouth dropped open. Get married? Was he crazy? Although, while I gaped at him, a tiny voice in my head warned me it was more than my mother ever got.

"I don't want a baby," I rasped. "I'd rather have—"

This time his expression turned dark, almost twisted.

"Don't you dare say it, Athena," he said darkly, giving me a full glimpse of the ruthless man underneath the cool façade.

I felt hot tears streaming down my neck.

"It can't end like this. It can't," I whispered, terrified. I wasn't ready to be a mother. I could barely take care of myself.

He pulled me into a tighter hug, his strong hands offering safety. "It's not the end, *amorina*. It is the beginning." I shifted back, searching out his face, finding nothing but sincerity there. "Now, shall I call the doctor back in?"

I swallowed with an audible gulp before nodding hesitantly. He shifted us around again, putting me back on the table while he went in search of the doctor.

“*Tutto bene?*” he asked when he returned, worry creasing his brow. When I gave him a blank expression, the doctor said in English, “It must be a shock, but a baby is a joyful affair.”

I nearly snorted, but thankfully I managed to show some restraint and agreed flatly.

I wasn’t sure what Manuel meant when he spoke of beginnings, but now was not the time or place to discuss it. I was exhausted, my brain mush and my emotions all over the place.

“If you haven’t been feeling nauseous, you’re a lucky woman,” the doctor explained. “You’ll need to start taking prenatal vitamins. I’ll send some home with you, along with a prescription to the pharmacy. Any bleeding or spotting?”

“No.”

He looked at Manuel. “She’ll need an obstetrician as soon as you can arrange it.”

“*Assolutamente.*”

I sighed, then steeled my spine. “You can talk to me, you know. He’s not my husband.”

“Yet,” Manuel chimed in, smiling smugly. What I wouldn’t give to wipe it off his handsome face right now. This situation was getting to me. It was the middle of the night, I was almost *killed* mere hours ago, and now I was discussing pregnancy and possible marriage.

The doctor sighed, probably ready to leave us to the tension. “Would you like to listen to the baby’s heartbeat?”

When I nodded, he placed the device he’d used before on my belly and adjusted the volume on the machine. And then we heard our baby’s heartbeat for the first time. A rapid *whoosh, whoosh, whoosh*, and a tremor rocked through my chest and all my thoughts about not wanting a baby ceased to exist. Everything changed and especially me.

It was all it took to fall in love.

THIRTY MANUEL



I should have known, recognized the signs. After all, I'd seen Donatella, my nephew's wife and mother to Enzo and Amadeo, throughout her pregnancies. Yet, just like Athena, the doctor's words had shocked me. She didn't have much of a bump at all, but I supposed her breasts were bigger and her skin was glowing.

I'd been driving for the past fifteen hours while Athena slept in the seat next to me. Somewhere in the night, she reached out and put her palm on my thigh, clutching my leg.

It gave me hope that she'd come around to this change we were about to face.

I hadn't lied—while I'd never envisioned myself having a child, I couldn't be happier. I'd ensure Athena and our baby were safe until I took my last breath.

I had to convince her to stay—for her sake and our baby's.

My cock thickened just thinking about her round belly... My child growing inside her... I could not wait to dote on her. She was going to make an excellent mother.

When we heard the heartbeat echo in Dr. Alleghri's office, I heard her sharp intake of breath, watched her expression soften.

Over the years, women had begged me to fuck them without a condom and I always refused. I never risked it, not wanting to bring an innocent child into this world. Yet, I'd been more than careless with Athena. Fucking her raw at every turn.

Probably because I knew she was the one from the start. She was never a casual fuck to me. And now, I'd keep her with me for the rest of our lives.

Fifteen hours of driving followed by a ferry ride and we were finally home—the island of Ischia. I turned down a long, paved road and drove through rows of cedar trees before coming to a ten-foot iron gate. The moment the men recognized me, it opened and I glided through just as the sun rose over my vineyards and orchards.

It was always the same feeling—pride, relief, love. This island set in the Bay of Naples, Ischia was home and I couldn't wait to see Athena's reaction. Would she love it as much as I do?

The road gradually sloped upward and, after breaking through the greenery, we were greeted by the sight of a large open landscape and the five-hundred-year-old castello that rose on top of the hill. Its slate roof gleamed under the rising sun and warm yellow light shone from the massive windows.

The house looked like something out of a fairy tale, and I hoped Athena would see it that way—for her sake and our child's.

I pulled around the circular drive in front of the castle where four men dressed in black were waiting.

They opened the car door, but before they could touch Athena, I hissed, "I'll get her."

"*Certamente*," the guard, Adriano, answered, bowing slightly and taking a step back.

I came around the car and scooped her sleeping body up, then made my way up the steps and inside. A cook was already hard at work, despite the fact that I hadn't been here in weeks. She always kept everything ready for me, and she fed the local men who worked on the property year-round.

"So nice to see you," she greeted me, her eyes falling on Athena. I had never brought a woman here.

"You too, *Signora Fiore*. Something smells delicious."

"Should I prepare you a plate?"

I lowered my eyes to the sleeping woman in my arms. "We'll be down later. It was a long night."

I was on the second-floor landing in no time, snaking through the familiar corridors toward my wing of the castle. Once I entered the master bedroom, I lowered her onto the bed.

Cazzo, she looked good in my bed. In my house.

Our house.

It was where she was meant to be and there was no doubt in my mind that she was the one I'd been waiting for.

Athena

Blinding sunshine and birdsong roused me from a deep sleep. When I opened my eyes, I found myself in a spacious room with large French windows that were wide open, inviting the daylight.

I jerked into an upright position, my eyes darting around in confusion.

"Where the hell am I?" I muttered.

Jumping out of bed, I made my way to the bathroom, finding it stocked with luxurious toiletries—all high-end Italian brands. And suddenly, the events of last night came rushing in.

The attack. The doctor. The pregnancy.

I met my reflection in the mirror, my bewildered eyes filled with panic.

"No," I scolded, waving my finger. "Keep your shit together. You've survived worse shit."

My words shattered the silence, bouncing off the walls, while a heaviness flooded me.

I wouldn't let what happened last night swallow me. Instead, I rushed back into the bedroom, my gaze darting around.

"Thank God," I whispered, finding my duffle bag seated on the little chest.

I started rummaging through it until I found my cell phone. My first inclination was to call my mother, but I thought better of it and scrolled through my contacts until I landed on Raven's name. She answered on the second ring.

"Where the hell are you?"

"The better question is where the hell were you last night?" I demanded.

"And where is Phoenix?"

A moment of silence passed before she answered. "She took off."

"What? Why?"

"I guess to look for Reina. Amon kidnapped her."

I gasped. "Jesus Christ." Then I remembered my original question. "Where were you last night?"

"Where did *you* go? And why was the apartment such a wreck?"

I stiffened. "You're not there, are you?"

"No, I'm staying with..." She faltered. "A friend."

I guess girls' days in the apartment were done for. Isla was married, Amon snatched Reina, Phoenix took off, I left with Manuel, and now Raven had a mysterious friend she thought she was doing a great job of hiding. I'd stake my life on it being Aiden Callahan, the Irish mobster.

"So where are you, Athena? Did you find yourself an Italian daddy too?"

I snorted. "I got knocked up by an Italian daddy."

I regretted saying it, but the words were out of my mouth and it was too late to take them back.

"You're joking, right?"

I sighed. "I wish."

"Jesus, Athena. How long have you been sleeping with him?"

I sat down on the bed, the landscape of shrubs, greenery, and the blue sea mocking me in the distance.

"I guess long enough to get knocked up."

"So you're keeping the baby?" Manuel's reaction from last night flickered into my mind. He was just as shocked as I was by the news, but for some reason, he appeared almost happy about it. "Are you going to marry your baby daddy?"

"Man, you're asking an awful lot of questions for someone who's over there keeping secrets."

"Pffft. Your shit's more exciting. You're gonna blow up like a balloon."

"Geez, thanks," I retorted wryly. "Nice to have your support." My stomach growled and I decided this conversation was over. In fact, I almost regretted calling her. Raven was my best friend and I loved her, but sometimes she could drive you insane. "I have to go."

She chuckled. "Why? Are you about to have wild, unprotected sex? Oh wait, you've already done plenty of that."

"Are you?" I snapped, slightly annoyed. "Let me guess, Aiden Callahan?" The moment I uttered the words, I wanted to reach out and stuff them back into my mouth. "Listen, I'm sorry—"

"He's keeping me locked up in his penthouse."

Confusion slammed into me. I wasn't quite sure what we were talking about anymore. "Huh? You're what now?"

A heavy sigh sounded over the line. "I ran into Aiden last night, and now he's keeping me prisoner. The only reason I know about the apartment is because he sent someone to go get my stuff."

"Do you want me to call the police?"

She snickered. "And say what? *This crazy Irish dude kidnapped my friend, but there's no evidence of it?* And even if they do find any, they'll never get close to him."

"Jesus, now I'm kind of thinking I got the better deal."

"I think so too." I heard a soft snuffle over the line. "And, Athena?"

"Yeah?"

"You'll be the most beautiful pregnant woman," she said softly.

My nose tingled, finding myself getting emotional.

"Thank you," I murmured. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No. I'll have to get myself out of this mess."

"Are you sure? Maybe I can get my Italian daddy to fight Aiden?"

Raven's chuckle crackled in my ear.

"Let the two of them kill each other. That's not a bad plan." It was ridiculous, but my chest twisted at the thought of Manuel being hurt. The man exuded power and strength—I saw it for myself last night. Thankfully Raven rejected the offer. "No, I'm fine. This thing with Aiden is long overdue. I can't keep running from it."

"Give him hell this time."

"Oh, I fucking will. The man will be begging me to leave when I'm done with him."

My lips curved into a smile. "That's my girl."

We talked for a few more minutes while I snooped around the room. When we hung up, I made my way into the giant walk-in closet filled with men's clothes that smelled like Manuel. Leaning in, I pushed my face into the expensive material and inhaled deeply. My stomach warmed and dipped, my lungs squeezing tight as I sighed.

"You're awake, I see."

I whipped around at the familiar voice and flushed crimson at being caught. "What are you doing here?"

He chuckled. "I live here."

"I didn't hear you come in," I breathed.

His gaze traveled over to the opposite side of the closet. "Whatever is missing, you can order it or we can go shopping."

My brows furrowed, following his eyes to find a whole section of brand-new clothes, from yoga pants to designer dresses. Even La Perla bras and panties.

“Umm, thank you.”

“The first drawer has a black Amex with your name on it. I remember you telling me you like to spend money.”

I’d been joking, of course, but I still padded over to the drawer. “What are you going to do if I spend *all* your money?”

He chuckled, the sound deep and raspy. “*Amorina*, we have enough money to last us five lifetimes. I’m counting on you to make a solid dent.”

Well, damn.

The words every woman wanted to hear and who was I not to oblige?

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THIRTY-ONE MANUEL



I couldn't wait to spoil her and our baby. Athena was to be healthy and happy throughout her entire pregnancy, and if that meant being at her beck and call, then so be it.

"Get dressed," I told her. "We'll have breakfast, and then I'll give you a tour of the island and our estate." Her eyes lit up. "Then we'll pick up your prenatal vitamins."

The light in her eyes dimmed and it saddened me, but I was confident she just needed time to come to terms with everything. After all, she was significantly younger than me, and she'd be the one to go through a myriad of changes.

"Is having a baby with me such a terrible thing?" I asked her, keeping my voice soft.

She met my gaze but remained stubbornly quiet, so I cupped her face and ran a thumb across her cheek.

"Tell me what troubles you, *amorina*, and I'll fix it." Her lips parted, a blush rising to her cheeks as she lowered her eyelids, and I tsked. "No hiding."

She lifted her eyes and met mine. "You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"It's just... a baby's a big responsibility. Massive."

"It is."

She chewed on her bottom lip. "And this is not how I envisioned my life going."

“Life isn’t really known to follow a plan.”

“You don’t say,” she said.

“Tell me how you envisioned your life,” I said, ignoring her sarcasm. “We’re not leaving until you do.”

She sombered, puckering her lips. I decided to be patient, letting her collect her thoughts.

“I just didn’t want to repeat my mother’s mistakes,” she finally said, fidgeting with a strand of her hair and twisting it around her finger over and over again. “And here I am, knocked up out of wedlock.”

Understanding dawned on me.

“You want to get married,” I reasoned.

She released an exasperated breath. “I wanted to be married *before* a baby entered the picture.”

Satisfaction ran hot through my blood. I initially planned to take it slow and ease her into the idea of marriage, but this might be even better.

I grinned. “You wish to get married, so we’ll get married.”

She blinked. “That’s not what I said.”

I chuckled. “But it’s what you meant.”

She rolled her eyes, making a frustrated sound in her throat. “I meant that people are supposed to get married, do the whole white-picket-fence thing, *then* start talking about children. Not have a one-night stand, get pregnant, and then—”

I leaned in to nip her bottom lip to stop her from rambling.

“We’re not just any people.” If I knew she’d cope with hearing it, I would have told her that I loved her already. But I knew I’d have to exercise patience there too. “And if you want a white picket fence, *amorina*, I’ll build one around this whole estate.”

Cazzo, I’d build her a damn arena if that was what she wanted.

I kissed her deeply and she sighed into my mouth while my insides burned with fire that I feared would consume me. This was what the Marchetti men were known for. Falling fast, loving hard.

Sign me the fuck up.

I slapped her butt and she yelped.

“Ouch.” She glared at me. “What was that for?”

“Get dressed so we can go shopping.”

I turned around and left her in the closet filled with both of our belongings and stopped in front of the French window. My property

stretched for miles, and the sight meant more than ever before. I would live out the rest of my days here with Athena and our child. I'd teach him or her to love and appreciate it as much as I do. The tangy smell of tangerines, the slightly salty air from the sea, the vineyards that surrounded the property.

The future seemed brighter than ever before.

I pulled out my phone and typed instructions to my staff, then I shot a message to Enrico. It was about time he returned the countless favors I was owed.



My driver rolled into town, taking the alternate route as instructed. I wanted Athena to see as much of the island as possible, and as she stared out of the car with wide eyes, her nose pressed to the car window, I knew it was the right choice.

With fascination and little excited gasps, she took in her new home. Granted, she didn't know we were living here yet.

I wasn't a normal man, and our life would always be lived in the shadows because of my work in the Omertà. The Triads posed a threat to her in Paris it seemed, and despite having a plethora of enemies even here in Omertà territory, she was safest in Italy. I wouldn't take any chances with Athena and our child. I vowed to make her happy; she deserved the best of everything.

My phone rang, but Athena didn't pay it any attention. Her entire focus was on the sights passing us by—Torre di Guevara, a historical 16th-century building next to the sea in a panoramic bay of Cartaromana, overlooking Ischia Ponte and our castello.

I answered my phone without checking who it was.

"You think you could have given me more notice, *vecchio*?" was Enrico's greeting, speaking in Italian.

I chuckled at his jab, responding in Italian too. "I know you can make it happen."

Ever since Athena entered my life, I felt like I'd been rejuvenated. Being around her made me feel like a younger, better version of myself. Yes, she turned me into a caveman, but it was so much more than that. We

were so good together and I finally understood my father's and brother's obsession with their women. I suspected Enrico did the same.

"Your trust might be misplaced this time," he answered in a quiet voice. "It seems every girl is missing except for Isla and Athena."

"What happened?"

"Well, if my assumptions are correct, Reina was kidnapped by Amon. Nobody has any fucking idea where Phoenix is. And Raven... Let's just say Aiden has a vested interest in her."

I didn't know why I was surprised. "What kind of interest?"

"Fuck if I know," he muttered. "Isla's staying tight-lipped."

I angled my face toward Athena. These girls sure kept a lot of secrets, and I was certain if I asked Athena, she probably wouldn't share them with me either.

"Anything that could interfere with business?" I asked.

"Who the fuck knows? At this point, would it make a difference?"

"Probably not," I agreed. "*Alora, ci vediamo a presto?*" Will we see you soon?

"You will, but why the rush?"

"*È incinta di sei settimane.*" She's six weeks pregnant.

He chuckled. "So while I was running after Isla, you were running after her friend?"

"Something like that."

He laughed. "Remind me to never play poker against you."

"Why do you keep speaking Italian?" At Athena's question, I said goodbye and ended the call.

"Because we're in Italy, *amorina*," I teased, running my fingers along her arm.

"I really need to download that app," she muttered under her breath.

"What app?"

"Duolingo." She leaned in, her green eyes twinkling mischievously. "So I can learn some Italian and spy on you."

I closed the distance between us, cupped her face, and kissed her. I groaned as my lips crashed roughly against hers. Athena's hands hesitantly slid over the back of my neck, her fingers threading through my hair as she moaned against my mouth.

Cazzo, I was head over heels for this woman. There was no fucking denying it.

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THIRTY-TWO

ATHENA



The picturesque town of Ischia on the island of the same name in the Campania region of southern Italy was surrounded by the Tyrrhenian Sea. Its vibrant colors blended with the azure colors of the sea, and I'd never seen anything so beautiful. Locals were busy working their shops, chatting animatedly with their neighbors.

We'd been walking the town's cobblestone streets for hours, Manuel's men making trips back and forth to the car with our shopping bags.

"Why do I need so much?" I asked for the hundredth time as we stopped in front of yet another store. "Your closet was already stocked with new clothes for me." A thought occurred to me and I stiffened. "Unless those were meant for someone else."

"They're all meant for you. I had *Signora* Fiore make arrangements when we left the clinic last night." He chuckled, his arm hooked casually around my shoulder, guiding me inside yet another store. "*Buon giorno, Signore Gioiello.*"

The salesman rushed over to us, a charming man with graying hair. He took Manuel's free hand and shook it enthusiastically, smiling widely while a string of rushed Italian left his mouth. Manuel responded in Italian, but I caught only one word. *Inglese*.

The salesman turned to me with wide eyes.

"Ahhh, *inglese*," he said, studying me with open interest. "Of course, we speak *inglese*. What can we do for you?"

"Athena, this is *Signore* Gioiello, the store owner."

I smiled, extending my hand. “Nice to meet you.”

The store owner took my hand, shaking it just as enthusiastically. “So happy you chose our store today.”

Manuel pulled me toward a glass display filled with jewelry. One ring caught my eye straightaway—a green emerald set on a platinum gold band, surrounded by black diamonds that reminded me of onyx eyes. For a single moment, I let myself imagine what it’d look like on my finger, how Manuel might look as he slid it on.

“Why are we buying jewelry?” I whispered under my breath, my eyes darting between him, the glass case, and *Signore Gioiello*.

A soft chuckle escaped his lips as he leaned against the counter.

“We’re getting wedding rings.”

My mouth dropped open. “W-wedding rings?”

He smiled proudly, like he just scored the jackpot.

I blinked, trying to clear my head from the rush of blood in my ears. He turned his attention to the glass display. “I like this one.” I followed his gaze to the beautiful emerald wedding band. It felt like a moment suspended in time. Out of all the rings on display, he’d homed in on the very one I’d been admiring. “Of course, you can have anything you want.”

“Ha! Sure,” I huffed. “Why don’t you just tell him to bag it all up?”

Without missing a beat, he turned to the store manager. “You heard my fiancée. We’re buying it all.”

“*Manuel*,” I hissed. Then, looking at the clerk, I stuttered, “N-no. *Scusi*. I was joking. *He’s* joking.” I arched a brow at Manuel.

“Ship it to the house.”

I brought a palm to my face and heaved a long sigh. “Jesus Christ.”

Signore Gioiello’s head followed our exchange with wide eyes. “Bag it, *Gioiello*.”

He moved around the counter, opened the glass cabinet, and started setting thousands—*millions* probably—of dollars’ worth of jewelry into their delicate boxes while I stared in shock.

“Stop, please just stop,” I said in an exasperated tone. This would have been funny, even somewhat romantic, if it were happening in the pages of my books. But this was real life. “I never even agreed to marry you. As a matter of fact, you just decided we’d get married but haven’t even asked.”

The words rushed out of me, my eyes burning with emotion. It was only earlier today that I admitted to him I didn’t want to have a baby out of

wedlock. It wasn't exactly asking him to marry me, but what if he felt... trapped?

"I think we're beyond grand gestures, *amore mio*." His voice was rough, the vehemence of it touching my skin. "But you're right; I haven't made myself clear." His eyes softened. "I want you to choose *us*. For our baby."

"I never imagined this was how my proposal would go."

His eyes flashed with darkness and he reached for the ring I'd been eyeing, then lowered down on one knee.

"Athena Kosta." He took my cold hand between his warm fingers. "Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

My heart stopped. "Why?"

"Why?" he repeated, his jaw clenching.

"Yes, why?"

"Because I love you." My heart expanded in my chest. "I think I fell for you the first moment I saw you."

"You don't mean that," I breathed.

Love hurts. Love is painful. My mother's words rang in my ears. I'd felt nothing but giddiness and butterflies and *want* since meeting Manuel. I felt... comfortable with him. My heart made funny little flips, but it was always a welcome feeling.

But my experiences, let alone my mother's, had taught me to question love at every turn. Not sex, because when it was all said and done, that was a physical act. But *love*... That was something entirely different. I'd seen my mother and her men fall in and out of love too easily and it made me question the sincerity of it all.

I wanted to believe that Manuel loved me, but fear and doubt were stronger.

We stared at each other, silence and vehemence in his eyes consuming me.

"Nobody falls that fast," I rasped.

"I did." The tenderness in those two words brought a rush of tears to my eyes. I'd written this very scene countless times, never expecting it might happen to me in real life one day. "I know you're scared of being disappointed, but I promise to never let you down. I'll always make you laugh, and you'll have my unquestionable loyalty, because you deserve it all. You deserve a love that calms your heart, mind, and soul—a love that will never hurt you or disappoint you." My chest trembled at his words. It

was too perfect; it couldn't be true. And yet... I found myself leaning into him, into the future he was painting for us.

"I—I don't know," I murmured.

"I vow to you, *amorina*, I'll make you love me too."

Maybe... maybe I'd fallen for him too? Except, shouldn't I care about him to the point of pain? That was all I'd ever known—with my mother, my girlfriends.

My heart dipped and squeezed in disappointment. I wanted to love him so desperately that I ached. The thing I was most afraid of and wished for more than anything was staring back at me. Would it be bad to snatch it for myself?

"Be mine, for better or for worse," he repeated. "Mine alone."

I reached out and gripped his hand, deciding on this day, under the heat of the Italian sun, with a new life growing inside of me, that I would take a leap of faith. That I would throw caution to the wind and hope I didn't fall. "Okay," I whispered, smiling softly. "Let's do it. I want to marry you." He wasted no time slipping the ring onto my finger, his own grin threatening to take over his entire handsome face. "But if we do this, you'll be my property too, *paparino*."

His coal-dark eyes were alight with steady conviction: he would make me love him.

But what if I wasn't capable of it?

THIRTY-THREE

ATHENA



The ride back to Manuel's place was quiet, bags of jewelry crowding the space in the back seat of the SUV. He relented in the end, after much insistence on my part, and agreed to leave two pieces of jewelry for *Signore* Gioiello's other customers. Besides, I had exactly what I wanted sitting pretty around my ring finger.

Once the car came to a stop, we exited together and he took my hand. The late afternoon's rays lowered over the citrus orchard and vineyards, the early-winter aromas permeating the air.

We walked up a slight hill toward the castle, the unobstructed view stealing my breath.

"It's beautiful," I murmured, stopping to take it all in.

"I'm happy you like it," he drawled. "This is where I want to raise our baby. I want you to be happy here." My chest squeezed, excitement and nerves at war inside me. "Now come, I have a surprise for you."

Manuel's driver rushed inside, his hands filled with bags while he issued orders to others who quickly joined him in helping unload.

Instead of asking about the surprise, I closed my eyes and voiced my most pressing concern. "I didn't do it on purpose."

He stopped abruptly, turning me around so we were facing each other. He stared down at me, his brows pulled together.

"Do what?"

"Get pregnant," I mumbled. "And it kind of looks like I'm trapping you, but—"

His lips twisted into that familiar, panty-melting smile as he shoved his hands into his trouser pockets.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe I trapped you?” he asked. I shook my head, frowning. “Neither one of us used protection, Athena. That’s not on you alone.” The air left my lungs as he continued. “Besides, it works in my favor because now I get to keep you, even though my declarations of love make you want to run.”

“Not true,” I objected, wincing slightly. This man was nothing if not perceptive.

“Liar.”

“I just don’t know what to make of it all,” I admitted. The truth was that my heart hadn’t stopped racing since we left the jewelry store. “You might regret it.”

“Never.” One word was enough to make me feel all squishy inside. One hand still in the pocket, he slung his other around my shoulder. “Now, aren’t you going to ask about your surprise?”

We started for the castello once more, my flats crunching the stones in the path.

“I’m just hoping it’s not more jewelry,” I croaked. “You almost had me believing you were going to clean that poor shopkeeper out.”

“I would have, if that’s what you wanted.” He smirked, then his eyes fell on my hand. “This is the only one that counts.”

As we came closer to the entrance, I noticed a commotion by the door. A towering man, dressed much like Manuel in a three-piece suit, stood with two boys who looked like his carbon copies.

They turned around as they noticed us approaching. I stopped short when two new figures came into view, my hand coming up to cover my open mouth. No, it couldn’t be.

“Is that...” I turned to Manuel. “What... How...” I couldn’t form the words. “You brought my mom?”

Manuel’s hand tightened around me and he bent his head, his mouth near my ear. “I want all the people you love surrounding you on the day you say yes to forever with me, *amorina*.”

Emotion swept through me and tears burned in my eyes. Without another word, I took off, sprinting toward my mom and best friend with a huge smile on my face. We crashed together in a mess of hugs and tears.

“Mom, I can’t believe you’re here,” I said, her red polka-dot A-line dress making her stand out in all the greenery. It was always “go big or go home” with Alexandra, and the effect had her looking forever youthful. It wasn’t uncommon for people to believe she was my and Isla’s age.

“Of course I’m here.” She pecked my cheek.

“This feels like *déjà vu*,” Isla said, laughing as her eyes went glassy, likely remembering back to her and Enrico’s wedding.

“Where are the girls?” I wondered, glancing around.

Isla’s expression fell.

“They’re all still MIA.” Worry settled in my stomach, but I tried not to let it show on my face. Although, judging by the expression on Isla’s face, she was struggling with the same thing. “I’m sure it’ll all end well.”

I didn’t know whether she was trying to convince me or herself.

“Yeah,” I murmured.

My eyes darted past Enrico to Isla’s stepsons, Enzo and Amadeo. “Hey, boys.”

Amadeo grinned. “I thought you were going to wait for me.”

Enzo bumped his shoulder against his brother. “No, she promised to wait for me.”

I chuckled. “I think Raven made those promises. If you’re going to be charmers, keep your facts straight.”

Isla waved her hand. “Go find some trouble to get into, you two. This is Athena’s day, so let’s focus on her.”

“Yes, let’s,” Mom chimed in. “This mama needs to have a mother-daughter talk. Isla, can you give me a moment with my baby?” The boys took off running and Isla flicked me an uneasy look. I gave her a reassuring nod and she gave us some privacy, wandering over to where the men were catching up. Mom pulled me into her side, the soft floral scent of her perfume reaching me. “*This* is not what I wanted for you, Athena.”

I fought the urge to jerk back, disappointment like lead in my stomach. I didn’t know what I expected, but this wasn’t it.

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t want you getting wrapped up with the mafia,” she said, a tremor slipping into her voice.

“You’re the mistress of the head of the Spanish mafia,” I pointed out, my voice slightly unsteady. “Isn’t that kind of hypocritical?”

She shook her head. “I do what I must so we can survive.” I tensed, something about her tone creeping into my veins with a warning. “Why did you keep this big secret from me?” she demanded, easing back to see my face. “And getting married! Why the rush?”

I flinched like I’d been struck. My mom’s words cut deep, and I found myself reverting back to the little girl starved for approval.

But today was about *my* decisions, *my* future with Manuel—a man who treated me right and who would be patient with me. I steeled my heart and raised my chin in defiance. We rarely didn’t see eye to eye, but it didn’t mean I was willing to let her dictate my life. “I’m a grown woman, and I’m doing this.”

I trusted Manuel to protect me. Yes, the baby wasn’t planned, but I knew we’d be safest with him.

“I’m going to catch up with Isla,” I finally said, giving her hand a final squeeze before slipping away. “Are you coming?” I called over my shoulder.

The light footsteps told me she was right behind me. “Athena, it’s not like you to be impulsive.”

I wheeled back around to face her, but my best friend cut in before I could reply. “Athena has spent her whole life playing by the rules, keeping both feet firmly planted inside the line. I’d say it’s time she let loose,” Isla said, winking. “Besides, now we’re going to be family.”

“But isn’t he a bit old for you?” Mom insisted, her eyes darting to Isla’s husband. “Just like yours is too old for you, young lady.”

I didn’t get to answer before Manuel’s possessive hand slipped around my hip.

“Alexandra,” he greeted my mother.

“Manuel,” she retorted back stiffly. “Eleven years ago I thought I’d never see you again, and now I can’t shake you off.”

“Is that the last time you saw him? At the opera house?” I asked innocently, knowing she’d seen him mere weeks ago in Spain during my visit.

Mom realized she slipped, but she wasn’t about to let that ruffle her feathers. “That’s beside the point. I don’t like this, Athena. You need to reconsider. He’s simply too old for you.”

That couldn’t be the only reason. After all, the man she was sleeping with was thirty years her senior.

“Athena can decide for herself who she chooses to spend her life with,” Manuel stated, his voice colder than Siberia. “But if my age and affection for your daughter bothers you, please feel free to skip the wedding.”

Before I realized what I was doing, I leaned into him, not caring what my mother thought about it. Or perhaps I was staking a claim, knowing full well she’d always found Manuel attractive.

“But we hope you won’t,” I added.

“You ladies should change.” Manuel pressed a kiss to my temple, his masculine scent wrapping around me like a protective cocoon. He turned his head toward my mother and asked, “Are you staying, Alexandra, or should I arrange for your transport?”

Mom’s shoulders slumped, resigned. “I’m staying. Athena is my only daughter. Of course I wouldn’t miss her wedding day.”

Relief washed over me and I smiled, taking her hand in mine. “Thank you.”

She still didn’t look ecstatic about it, but she gave me a nod and the slightest of smiles. “Anything for you.”

Isla clapped her hands. “Just wait until you see the gown.”

“Can’t wait,” I said, grateful for Isla’s enthusiasm.

“I will see you at the altar shortly, *amorina*.”

Releasing me, he strode toward the house along with Enrico. I wondered when he’d had the time to organize everything. *It pays to be rich, I guess.*

“One sec,” I told my mom and Isla, then ran after them. Once inside, I grabbed Manuel’s hand, pulling him to a stop. When he shot me a confused look, I blurted out in a breathy tone, “What do you mean you’ll see me at the altar?”

Enrico chuckled. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Neither of us turned to look at him, our gazes locked in a wordless exchange.

“Manuel?” I breathed. “Thank you.”

“Of course. I’d pull stars from the sky for you, *amorina*.”

Gosh, when he uttered such sweet things like this, my heart threatened to melt away for him into a puddle at my feet. How was a girl supposed to remain sensible around him?

“Are you sure we’re not rushing this?”

“You said yes,” he stated calmly, but there was heat in his gaze that could light me on fire. “I don’t want to waste any time.” He took my nape with a calloused palm, holding me firmly. He bent down, his lips brushing lightly against my cheek. The light touch sent shivers through me. “I’m not getting any younger and I don’t want to give you a chance to change your mind.”

“What if it’s your mind that changes?” I retorted breathlessly.

“Impossible.”

Then he kissed me deeply, his tongue licking its way into my mouth. I fisted his suit jacket, pulling him harder against me. He groaned low in his throat, his free arm circling my waist, pulling my body flush with his. He devoured me, obliterating me with his lips in a way that made my toes curl. Our kiss was what every romance writer in the history of mankind had written—consuming and passionate.

Finally, he pulled back and pressed our foreheads together.

“Don’t make me wait,” he said softly, his words mingling with our heavy breathing. “Tonight, I want you in my bed as my wife.”

“Okay,” I heard myself answer, and I was rewarded with a smile that could easily melt an armor made of iron, never mind my panties.

Italian men certainly knew how to charm women into submission.

THIRTY-FOUR MANUEL



The basement of the castle was musty and rarely used. Back in the fifteenth century, it functioned as a dungeon to detain captives and enemies of the family who owned the castle.

I hadn't had the pleasure of using it... until today.

"You should let me handle it," Enrico stated as we made our way down the stone steps. "It's your wedding day."

I flashed him a smile. "No fucking way. These men are after Athena. They're mine."

While I would regularly object to bringing these men anywhere near my home, especially with Athena here, I knew that time was of the essence. We needed to get to the bottom of the reason the Triads were after Athena.

"How did you find them?"

He shrugged. "I had Danil followed."

My steps halted at the bottom step and I turned to face him. I took a breath and asked the question that'd been burning since we ran into him outside Athena's apartment last night—after the men from that very organization had tried to harm her. My gut warned that such coincidences didn't exist, and I feared I was about to have my suspicions confirmed. "He's working with them?"

"I don't know," he admitted, and I felt my shoulders relax. "My men didn't bug the room, so we have no idea what they discussed. But this guy was in the room with Danil when he talked to the head of the Triads, Qian Long."

We resumed walking while I churned over this information. “Did you get anything out of Lykos?”

“Just that Athena’s mother is not to be trusted.”

I agreed with him there. “It seems to be a recurring comment,” I pointed out.

We entered the first cell, lit by a single naked lightbulb hanging in the center of the room. A small table sat in the corner with some coercion equipment while a man sat strapped to a chair, glaring at us, his eyes burning with hatred.

“You’ll pay for this,” he spat in a mixture of Chinese and heavily accented and very poor English. “You cannot touch the Triads without consequences.”

There was an unspoken rule between criminal organizations—no encroaching on each other’s business. The Triads hadn’t technically done either—*yet*—but the moment my ring was on Athena’s finger, any subsequent attack would become my business.

“Well, from where I’m standing, you’re on my territory, so I can do whatever I want to you,” I drawled, speaking in Chinese. Not too many of the Triads’ members could speak English, even less Italian. Enrico didn’t speak the language, but this concerned my woman, not his. “And now you’ve gone and involved my wife.”

Fear entered his eyes. “Your w-wife?” he stuttered. “You’re not married.”

I smiled viciously. “Oh, but I am.” I’d removed my suit jacket and had begun to roll up my sleeves. “Athena Kosta Marchetti è *la mia donna*. My wife.”

She might not be legally my wife yet, but the moment my seed entered her womb, she was mine.

The realization entered his eyes with the knowledge he’d die here today.

“Do you know who we are?” Enrico asked, and I translated. The man closed his eyes, his lips moving soundlessly as if he was praying.

“When you fuck with the Marchettis, you get skinned alive,” I stated casually.

He stopped praying and swallowed loudly.

I continued. “There is one thing we never forgive, and that’s going after our women and families.”

He shook his head. “We didn’t know—”

I raised my hand, silencing him. “Before I leave this room, you will tell me what Danil Popov and your boss discussed.”

“I don’t know, I swear.”

I didn’t believe him for a second. “Let’s test your knowledge, shall we?”

As if on cue, the door to the cell opened and Umbrio strutted in with another man, pulling a cart behind him, its squeaky wheels the only sound apart from our guest’s anxious breathing and unintelligible murmurs. The brazen bull sat atop the dolly’s metal tray, a contraption used by the ancient Greeks and Romans. The bull-shaped brass device was hollow and big enough to put a human inside and roast him alive. Flute-like pipes would carry his screams through the bull’s nostrils, creating animalistic music while the smoke of the scorched flesh billowed out as puffs of incense.

It’d be a slow and painful death.

Giving a nod to Umbrio, he jerked our captive out of the chair and put him into the pot, still tied.

Once the fire started, it took no time for his screams to fill the dungeon.

“What did they talk about?” I asked calmly.

“I don’t know!”

“Bullshit. Cooperate and I’ll give you a quick death.” He was trembling, eyes wide with visions of what was to come. I flicked a glance to Umbrio. “Add some heat to that fire, will you?”

He did as asked, and soon the musty room stunk of burning flesh. The man’s head was hung low, saliva dripping from his mouth.

“Tell me,” I gritted.

“I don’t know.”

Pissed off he wasn’t breaking, I reached for my knife and sliced his ear off. Blood surged down his face as he screamed again.

“I won’t stop until I get the answers I’m seeking,” I warned.

He shook his head. “Please, they spoke in English mostly. Couldn’t understand most of it.”

Cazzo.

“You said mostly,” Enrico chimed in. “What did you hear?”

When he didn’t answer, I sliced his other ear while Umbrio added an extra log to the fire. When the screams died down, I spoke again. “Tell me what was said.”

“He—they mentioned a wedding. No names.”

“And?”

“It will unite the Triads with the Balkans.”

Qian Long had no daughters or sisters, which led to one conclusion. Danil Popov planned to marry either Nicki or Athena off. Considering it was widely known that Nicki Popova was damaged goods and the woman didn’t know how to shut the fuck up, I’d put my money on Athena being the best and only choice.

I glanced at Enrico, who must have come to the same conclusion. I stood and began rolling my sleeves down, then I put my jacket back on.

The man begged for his life, sobbing as his shoulders shook, and it was Enrico who put him out of his misery with a single bullet.

Enrico and I left Umbrio to clean up, heading back upstairs to my office. We ran into the boys, their smirking faces buried in a book.

“What are you two reading that’s so entertaining?” Enrico called.

Their heads whipped up and a blush crept up their olive skin as Amadeo quickly snapped the book shut.

“Nothing.”

I flicked a glance at the title along the spine and groaned. “Didn’t I tell you to stop reading that stuff? You’re too young.”

Enzo rolled his eyes, but Amadeo shoved the book behind his back as if to keep me from snatching it.

“We are not,” Amadeo protested.

“We’re learning the art of lovemaking.”

“*Che?*” Enrico asked, confused, his eyes darting between his sons incredulously. “What *lovemaking?*”

I groaned, muttering a prayer. “*Dio mio, salvami.*”

“You boys better explain,” Enrico demanded.

Amadeo shrugged. “It’s a romance novel.”

Enzo smiled. “It’s good education.” This confused Enrico even more.

“We just learned how to give women cumlashes,” Amadeo explained, chuckling and grinning like a fool. “Our women won’t stand a chance.”

“You two will earn a kick in the balls if you attempt that with the wrong woman,” I warned them, then added, “*Mi dispiace*—with the wrong *girl*.”

Amadeo puffed out his chest. “Woman or girl, she’ll like it.”

Enzo elbowed him, hissing something under his breath, but his brother ignored him.

“Give me that book,” Enrico gritted, extending his hand, “before I decide to beat you with it.”

I found myself praying Athena was carrying a girl.



I took a shower in the guest room and got dressed, then entered the adjoining walk-in closet to put on my vest, tie, and jacket.

The back of my neck itched as I worked on my tie, and as I turned around, I found Alexandra lounging on the bed of the guest room. The dress she was wearing was hiked up, her thighs spread, giving me a clear view of her underwear.

I breathed harshly through my nostrils, my anger igniting.

“Like what you see, baby?”

My anger turned into rage and I had to take a step back to keep from murdering my soon-to-be mother-in-law.

“No, and if you had an ounce of respect for your daughter or yourself, you would get the fuck out. Your games aren’t welcome here.”

She palmed her breasts, moaning. It was like watching a budget porno. I really should have followed my intuition and not invited the bitch. The woman was a snake.

“Get the fuck out, Alexandra. You’re in the wrong room,” I stated, my voice cold as ice while my control teetered on the edge. There was nothing about her that tempted me—not even a little. “Go help your daughter get ready or I’ll make you regret ever stepping foot on these grounds.”

Alexandra smiled, showing her full set of teeth, her likeness that of a shark.

“She’s quite capable,” she rumbled, her hand inching lower. “Maybe I can help *you*?”

“I’d rather be burned alive,” I greeted. “How did you get in here? *When* did you?”

“You were in the shower.” She chuckled. “Don’t worry, I didn’t watch. Voyeurism isn’t my thing.”

“I really don’t give a fuck what your thing is. Never have and never will. You’re only here because I want to see Athena happy.”

“That’s just it,” she purred. “I don’t believe you. You wanted to get close to me.”

This fucking woman.

“You’re delusional. And if you think I’d touch you on my *wedding* day, let alone fucking *ever*, you need to see a doctor, because you’re also insane. Athena is the only one I want.”

“Athena is a girl, Manuel. You need a woman. I can give you passion and so much more.” I scoffed, not even granting her a response. “Our relationship would be unmatched.”

I laughed.

“You mean your thorns of desire would be deadly. They’d make the love of my life bleed and cause her pain. But you don’t care, do you? You’re a snake, only a cheap and faded version of Athena.” I fixed my cuff links and pulled on my suit sleeves. “Now, what is it that you really want, Alexandra? I thought I made it crystal clear eleven years ago that you aren’t the woman for me.”

For a moment, she hesitated. Then she pulled her dress down and cut the shit, knowing her attempts at seduction were futile.

“You were cruel to me that day.”

“I made a point that day,” I corrected her. “You should heed it, because it still stands.”

Memories of her deceit and attempted entrapment filtered in like a bitter pill.

Her petite body lay in the hospital bed, pale and bruised, and regret hit me at the harsh words I spat at her a week ago when I caught her using an innocent child’s voice as her own. Even after she had been caught red-handed, Alexandra didn’t bother recognizing the child—whoever that little girl with the mean kick was—as the owner of that amazing voice.

But that was neither here nor there. Alexandra was in the hospital bed, looking fragile and so damn beaten. I didn’t like to see any woman in this condition, no matter my scruples. It was the reason the Omertà never got involved in human trafficking.

None of us could tolerate that shit.

The smell of bleach and disinfectant dominated the room, her soft whimpers moving her lips in a distorted prayer.

“What happened?” I asked her, keeping my voice low.

She mumbled quietly and I leaned in, putting my ear closer to her mouth.

“Say that again.”

It was then that it hit me. The heavy scent of powder and makeup.

"They were looking for you," she said.

"Who was?" I straightened to my full height, studying her face with narrowed eyes.

Her eyes fluttered open, but nothing about them fascinated me. All I saw was deceit. Again.

"I didn't tell them anything," she whispered.

She couldn't have told them anything because she knew nothing—not about my business and not about the Omertà.

I brought my finger to her face, dragging it across her cheek, and the coat of heavy makeup came off, revealing nothing but healthy skin underneath. She startled, frozen in shock that I'd discovered the truth so easily, and tried to shift away, but it didn't matter.

Without a word, I turned on my heel. I was almost at the hospital room's door when her voice stopped me. "I'm sorry, okay? I didn't know what else to do... You weren't answering my calls."

"So you decided to... what? Lure me here and play the victim?" I hissed. "The bruises were a nice touch. How did you get the hospital to call me?"

She lowered her eyes in remorse, but I knew better. The conniving woman didn't possess a conscience.

"I bribed them," she admitted, tears magically appearing. She was an excellent actor, I'd give her that. "I had to see you again."

"No, what you need to do is find that child and apologize for using her."

Her eyes widened. "She's nobody."

My molars ground so hard, I was surprised they didn't crack.

"That alone tells me so much about you, Alexandra," I gritted. "Besides, with a voice like that, that girl is somebody."

"You can't do that to me; discard me like I'm nothing," she screeched.

I sighed. "I'm not doing anything to you. In fact, I'd prefer never to see you again."

She started crying, throwing theatrics and looking so pitiful that it almost made me feel sorry for her. Almost.

Gripping the cool metal handle, I opened the door. "You're a real piece of work. A fucking bastard. Just like the rest of them," she spat.

I scoffed. "Maybe, but let me ask you." Glancing over my shoulder, I continued. "Where did that girl end up?"

She blinked, quiet for a moment before she found words.

"I don't know. Why does it matter?"

"Men might be bastards, Alexandra, but you're no better. You use and discard."

Then I walked out and shut the door on her forever.

"My daughter isn't right for you," she hissed, her fury bringing me back to the present. I disliked her then, but now I hated her, because I knew the girl she used was her *own daughter*. Because she left her child alone and vulnerable while she went around seducing men. And Athena, who looked for the best in people, was loyal to a woman who didn't deserve her grace. I doubted Athena even knew the extent of her mother's toxicity.

I let out a sardonic breath. "Impossible."

Her eyes flared. "Why?"

"Because she's the only *right* and *good* thing in my life," I said, feeling the truth reverberate down to my marrow.

"You don't know what you're doing, Manuel," she hissed, straightening up on the bed. "You can't even begin to fathom the repercussions of marrying her."

She broached the subject, so I seized the moment. Athena might have escaped the Triads' wrath twice now, but unless I knew what I was up against, she'd remain in danger.

"You mean the fact that she's Atticus Popov's daughter," I said casually, reveling in the way Alexandra's eyes widened. "Or that the Triads are after her?"

She glared at me. "How do you know any of that?"

"I've done my homework," I deadpanned.

Understanding gleamed in her eyes. "And you think you can use her birthright and the Popov name to your advantage."

I took a step forward, hovering over her like a dark cloud. "Listen here, Alexandra. Nobody will be using Athena for anything," I said, warning clear in my tone. "That includes you. *Capisce?*"

Her smile was oily. "How could I possibly use my own daughter?"

"Why are the Triads after her?"

She sprang up, scoffing dismissively. "Why would they care about her?"

"Because of what you and Atticus did." I was speculating, but I had a hunch she wouldn't call my bluff.

“I never got involved in Atticus’s business, so you’ll have to ask him what he did.”

“I don’t believe you.” It infuriated me that Alexandra was so selfish she refused to tell me how to protect her daughter. The thought of losing Athena to the Triads squeezed my chest. “So tell me where in the fuck he is and I’ll ask him.”

She shrugged nonchalantly. “I don’t keep track of my old lovers.”

I took a deep breath. I wouldn’t learn anything from Alexandra, not unless it benefited her in some way.

“If you have something meaningful to say, do so now. Otherwise, get the fuck out.”

She dragged a hand through her hair.

“You cannot marry her,” she insisted. “Athena can’t be associated with the Omertà. Or any criminal organization.”

“Why not?”

Her chest heaved. “Because...”

I waited but she never finished the sentence.

My voice was unnaturally calm. “You’re her mother, but unless you tell me what’s going on, I can’t protect you. And please understand, I’ll only be doing so for Athena’s sake—because she matters, not you.”

Thick silence crept through the room while I waited for her to come clean.

“You can’t possibly want her. She’s half your age. I should drag her out of here by her hair. One day she’d thank me.”

I snapped.

I stormed over to the bed and wrapped a hand around her throat. It was so tempting to just squeeze and end her. It’d be so easy, and she’d cease to be a threat.

This woman had some balls. If she was wary of me out of genuine concern for her daughter, I’d commend her, but she was doing this for entirely selfish reasons.

“Athena is mine now—to protect, to love, and to cherish. I’m not going to stand for you dragging her into any kind of shit. Stay clear of anything that could put Athena in harm’s way. This will be your only warning.”

“Maybe you should heed your own warning. Nothing good can come out of this life, out of marrying *you*.”

“If you even think about harming my wife, emotionally or physically, I’ll smash your skull in with my bare hands,” I warned, gritting my teeth.

Her mother smiled coldly. “She’s not your wife.”

“Yet,” I said coldly.

By the time the sun set on this day, she’d be mine forever.

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THIRTY-FIVE

ATHENA



“I can’t believe you’re going to have a little baby soon,” Isla said, her eyes growing soft. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, her hair and makeup immaculate as always.

We were in the bedroom, and I was trying on wedding dress number five. It was a good thing Manuel’s walk-in closet was large enough to accommodate all the gowns he’d had delivered today.

“Me neither,” I admitted, glancing at the door. “I haven’t had any morning sickness. No weight gain. Nothing.” I turned on the spot and glanced at my reflection in the mirror. “Okay, I don’t think this is the right dress.”

“Try the next one,” Isla encouraged. “One is bound to be perfect.”

“Although, I think my boobs are bigger,” I said, my eyes darting to the door again.

My mom left thirty minutes ago to get freshened up and had yet to come back. I trusted Isla’s opinion, but it still seemed like something my mom should experience with me.

“Just a lot of unprotected sex, huh?” she teased, pulling my attention.

I shook my head. “You’d think we’d have known better.”

She raised both palms. “Not for me to judge.”

“I’m just disappointed in myself,” I admitted, standing in my underwear as I scouted my dress options. “I promised myself I wouldn’t repeat my mom’s mistake.”

“Well, you didn’t exactly repeat her mistake.”

“How do you figure that?” I asked her as I stepped into a simple couture dress with a neckline that elongated my silhouette. It was minimalistic yet stunning.

“She was banging a married man,” she explained. “Manuel is single. And he wants to marry you.”

“But he’s a criminal.”

Isla knew this world, the dangers of it, with her husband and brother being in the mafia.

Isla shrugged. “They’re better criminals than our fathers, and more importantly, more caring.”

She was right. Our fathers didn’t deserve us. Their selfishness and inability to remain faithful started shit, and they’d left us behind to deal with the consequences of their actions.

“You’re right,” I whispered. “You’re so damn right.”

I swung around and studied myself in the mirror.

“Holy shit,” she murmured. “I think you found your dress.”

“Yes,” I agreed, unable to peel my gaze from my reflection. The dress clung to me like a second skin while accentuating my waist and softening my curves. “I think you’re right.”

My eyes darted to the door again. Where was she?

Isla must have picked up on my mounting anxiety. “She knows only the bride wears a wedding dress, right? Surely she’s done by now.”

I laughed, but there wasn’t much humor in it. “Maybe she got lost on her way back from her room.”

“Does your mom know about the baby?” she asked, her voice low. “She was in shock when we picked her up and kept asking for the reasoning behind this whirlwind wedding.”

“No, she doesn’t know.”

“Are you going to tell her?”

“Eventually. If only she hadn’t dated him before.”

Her eyes widened. “Get the fuck out. You’re making that shit up.”

I shook my head. “I wish.”

“So you’re sleeping with your mother’s ex-lover.” She smirked, her voice dry. “She must be overjoyed.”

“Thankfully they never had sex.” I grabbed her hand and squeezed gently. “Promise you’ll never tell anyone.”

She rolled her eyes. “I promise, although the girls wouldn’t judge you.”

"I know, but it still feels weird." I sighed. "I wish they were all here. I hope they're okay."

She stood next to me, eyeing me in the mirror. "They'd be here if they could. They're going to be fine, Athena. Don't worry." She brushed my hair back with gentle hands. "But we won't be if we don't make you the most beautiful bride."



There was a knock at the door and Mom walked in.

"Is it time?" Isla asked, excited to get the wedding going. My mom didn't comment, her eyes locked on my face.

"Where have you been?" I asked as I smoothed down my wedding dress.

"Athena, this is a mistake," she said gravely. She took my forearm, her fingers digging into my flesh. "Let's get out of here, okay? You can come to Spain with me."

I yanked my hand out of her grip. "I told you already, Mom, I'm marrying him."

Her eyes flared angrily. "He's all kinds of wrong for you."

I gave her an incredulous look while Isla stood to the side staring at her with a shocked expression.

"You're kidding, right? Why do I get the feeling that if it was *you* he wanted to marry, your story would be completely different."

It was a cheap shot and I knew it, but the words were already out and there was no taking them back.

Her eyes bore into me. "You're young, why does it have to happen today? Wait a year or two, and if you still feel the same way, then we'll reconsider."

"No," I snapped, putting my foot down once and for all. "There's nothing to reconsider." It was time to come clean and be honest with my mother. "I'm pregnant." A bloodred flush washed over her complexion and she gaped at me. "Whether you like it or not, I'm marrying him. You can be happy for me and stay, or you can leave."

I turned to Isla, who handed me my bouquet—a tasteful arrangement of red roses. I headed out of the room with her by my side. We walked in

silence, my shaking hand in her comforting one, my heels clacking on the marble floors while my heart pounded in my chest.

It wasn't until we stepped out onto the veranda, overlooking the vineyards, lemon trees, and the sea in front of us, that Mom appeared at my side.

Isla squeezed my hand as we stepped through the open door.

"I asked Enzo and Amadeo to be the flower boys," she said, and suddenly the mood lightened. We shared a glance and chuckled softly.

Amadeo and Enzo appeared in front of us wearing three-piece suits, little replicas of their father who I spotted down the path, his eyes hidden behind dark aviators. The music began and off they went, dancing down the makeshift aisle, throwing red petals on the ground, their moves nothing short of suave.

"What are they doing?" Mom asked in shock.

I kept my gaze on the boys, smiling. "Being the best flower boys the world has ever seen."

With each step, the Marchetti boys created a path of red rose petals, leading to where Manuel stood, tall and imposing.

The music changed from a dance beat to Pachelbel's and then everyone's eyes turned to me.

Taking my first step, all my attention was on the man waiting for me. He was wearing a sharp black tux, and the heat in his dark eyes drew me forward. Emotion I couldn't quite decode flitted over his expression—I suspected a combination of obsession and impatience—and it made my toes curl.

The whole world disappeared, red petals flattening under my shoes. I closed the distance between us and Manuel extended his hand, reaching for me. My fingers interlaced with his, my engagement ring glinting under the late afternoon sun.

The priest in his white frock greeted us, and the rest was a blur until he asked us to recite our vows.

We faced each other, and Manuel spoke first. "I, Manuel Marchetti, take you, Athena Kosta, to be my wife."

THIRTY-SIX MANUEL



I'd never seen a more beautiful woman.

As we made our promises to each other in front of our family and the priest, I pushed all thoughts of my run-in with Alexandra out of my mind and focused on my bride. The whole world ceased to exist, and with her hands in mine, we were proclaimed husband and wife.

She bound herself to me wearing a beautiful but simple dress that accentuated her figure. A bouquet of red roses and white lilies rested in her hands, while her dark hair fell loose down her back in waves.

"*Vi dichiaro marito e moglie!*" the priest announced, marrying us in the thousand-year-old courtyard.

I took her mouth for a kiss. The cheers barely registered as her soft lips molded to mine, her body pliant. *Dio mio*, this hunger for her would never ease. Not while there was breath left in my body.

"*Dai, andiamo!*" Enzo finally called out. "This *bacio* will starve us all. End it and let's go eat."

I never wanted to forget this. *Cazzo*, I never wanted to end this kiss. That's how gone I was for my beautiful wife.

I slowly trailed my tongue over the corner of her mouth and gave her a final peck. I'd never wanted marriage or cared that it wasn't in the cards for me, and I'd never been happier about being wrong.

I straightened and Athena leaned against me, bringing a hand to her swollen red lips.

“We have to break the glass first,” Enrico said, handing me a crystal wineglass.

“Two Italian weddings in the span of a few months,” Isla said, standing next to my wife as her bridesmaid. “We’ll be experts soon.”

Athena’s cheeks flushed pink and she whispered, “There better be many pieces, because there’s a baby involved now.”

The number of shards would signal the number of years we would be happily married.

We both held the delicate wineglass.

“*Uno, due, tre,*” I said, and we let it fall.

Shards flew everywhere, glittering on the stone courtyard.

Athena winked. “Looks like we’re stuck together.”

I looped my arm around her waist, scooped her up, and made my way over the threshold of our home as I spoke quietly in her ear. “Forever, Athena Marchetti.”

We proceeded through the decorated house to the dining room where we spent the next few hours. Dinner was intimate and the food plentiful, and I made a note to thank my staff for their efforts.

The formal dining room had been transformed with sheer fabric, white candles, and tiny lights, reflecting a soft glow off the walls and crystal chandelier. Fresh flowers decorated every corner of the room and soft music drifted through the air.

Athena sparkled, just like the diamonds and emeralds on her finger. While her mother wasn’t overly enthusiastic, she wasn’t ruining the mood either. I didn’t think anything could.

Enzo and Amadeo flirted shamelessly with Athena and Isla, and despite knowing it was harmless, it took all I had not to send my nephews flying onto the next continent. Then Amadeo had to take it a step too far, extending his hand in invitation to dance.

“*Ragazzi,*” I called out to both boys, their eyes instantly flying to me.

“*Sì?*”

“Want to keep your hands?” They nodded in unison. “Then keep them off my wife.”

Athena rolled her eyes. “Isn’t that going a bit too far?”

I flashed her a grin. “I don’t think so.”

“What if another woman touches you?” she asked, tilting her chin up in challenge.

I scoffed.

“There’ll be no other woman touching me, *amorina*. You can count on that.” Her mouth parted and her cheeks flushed deep red. “I’ll kill her myself.”

Let that be a message to her mother too.

Another roll of my young wife’s eyes and she shifted her attention back to a beaming Isla.

“Who would have ever thought, huh?” Enrico said, watching his wife as feverishly as I was watching mine.

“We must have done something right, old man,” I retorted wryly.

“Careful who you’re calling old, *vecchio*.” He chuckled. “Is she happy about the baby?” Enrico asked, suddenly serious.

“It was a shock to us both,” I admitted, my eyes softening on Athena, “but I think she’s coming to terms with it.”

My wife must have sensed we were talking about her because she lifted her head, her sparkling eyes meeting mine.

Madre di Dio, I couldn’t wait to get my wife alone.



Watching the taillights disappear down the long driveway, I pulled my wife into my arms and walked us back inside.

“What are you doing?” she squealed.

I grinned rakishly. “I’m taking you to our bedroom. I’ve been waiting all day to have my way with you.”

She let out a raspy chuckle. “You won’t say that when I’m wobbling around with a massive belly. You’ll hide from me when I’m horny.”

My steps faltered and I lowered my head, giving her an incredulous look. “*Impossibile*. I’m always going to want you—old, feeble, on my deathbed.”

No sooner had we stepped into the bedroom than I kicked the door shut with my foot and kissed her hungrily.

Lowering her onto the bed, I let my eyes roam over her body, over her long hair fanned across the pillow. My hand slid down to her waist, the soft material of her dress in my way.

She lifted herself up on her elbows, desire matching my own flickering in her eyes. I reached for the knife in my holster, and in one swift move, I cut through the expensive silk like paper, impatient to have her bare for me.

"Hey," she protested. "I liked that dress."

I smiled, my eyes traveling over every inch of her gorgeous body.

"I like it better off," I said, carefully cutting through her bra and panties before setting the knife down on the nightstand. My hands slid down her waist, her skin smooth and soft under my fingertips as I kneaded her ass, my fingers teasing. "Nothing compares to your naked body, *amorina*."

"Ditto," she whispered. "Can I cut through your suit with a knife too?" I inhaled deeply and reached for the blade, handing it to her. "Wow, you trust me with a knife?"

I chuckled, sliding my jacket off. "If I have to die, it might as well be by your hand."

She sat up, reaching for the hem of my dress shirt while holding the knife, contemplating the best way to go about it. I stood still as she maneuvered the fabric around.

She exhaled, throwing the knife back on the nightstand.

"Maybe we just do it the old-fashioned way," she muttered, reaching for the buttons. "I don't want to murder you before getting off at least once."

Our movements turned hungry and impatient, and I was finally naked. Athena's gaze roamed over my body, pausing on my hard cock, leaking with pre-cum. She licked her lips.

"That didn't take long," she murmured, her slim fingers wrapping around my shaft.

I pushed my hand into her hair and tightened my grip. "In case it's escaped you, wife, I'm obsessed with you."

I took her mouth, my free hand spreading her thighs open, and slipped a finger into her heat. She moaned into my mouth, kissing me harder, and I pressed my thumb against her clit.

"Your pussy is always so wet for me," I groaned.

I grabbed her by her ass, her legs wrapping around my waist, and switched us around so she was straddling me, my back against the headboard. I rotated my hips, pressing my cock against her heat.

I pulled her closer, my lips brushing against hers.

"Whose pretty mouth is this?" I asked, my voice rough.

She didn't hesitate. "Yours."

“And this pussy?”

“Mine,” she teased.

“*Mine*,” I growled. “You’re all mine. My wife. My property. All mine.”

She pulled away slightly, locking eyes with me.

“You’re my property too, then,” she murmured.

“I’m yours,” I vowed before slamming my mouth against hers, kissing her hungrily.

She was circling her hips in my lap, driving me fucking mad. I moved my hand down her body, my fingers finding her wet pussy, and traced her swollen clit.

“Manuel,” she moaned. “I need you inside me.”

She lifted herself up and grabbed my cock between her dainty fingers, my ring staring back at me, and we both watched as she sunk lower.

“*Cazzo*.” I clenched my jaw at the sensation, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck as my cock disappeared inside her pussy. “Take what you need, *amorina*, or I’ll lose all control and fuck you into oblivion.”

Her breasts pressed against my chest as she pushed her fingers into my hair, gripping me as she rode my cock.

“You’re mine now too,” she groaned, riding me harder, making my every fantasy come true.

I grabbed her hair and pulled her closer, my lips brushing against hers. With a growl, I began pounding into her, imprinting on her heart and soul. The way she’d already staked a claim on mine.

“I’m yours, Athena.” My voice came out guttural as I watched her ride me, her long hair a mess and her lips swollen. I thrust into her, her arousal dripping down on my thighs. “You’re a fucking vision.”

Her lips found mine as I fucked her harder, our grunts and moans mixing. She was getting closer, and the sight was taking me right along to my own release.

“Oh... my God,” she moaned, her eyes fluttering shut and her muscles contracting around my cock like a vise. “Manuel... Manuel, I’m coming.”

And she took me right along with her.

“*Cazzo*,” I groaned against her lips, my dick twitching with my release.

For a moment we remained still, her body shuddering against mine as my cock settled inside her hot pussy.

I’d never get enough of her.

“Athena,” I whispered, and she looked at me with those mesmerizing green eyes, a satisfied smile on her lips. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted.”

She sighed, bringing her forehead to rest against mine. “I’m starting to think you’re everything I needed.”

This was love. And I would hold on to it with all my might.

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THIRTY-SEVEN

ATHENA



I *couldn't breathe. I couldn't see the sky.*

The invisible hand tightened around my neck and I thrashed against the barrier, my arms and legs bound and desperate to be set free.

"Please." I tried to scream, but I couldn't find my voice. Tears blurred my vision. My lungs burned. I was dying... I didn't want to die.

"Amorina." I stopped, let the voice caress me. *"Wake up."*

I wrenched my eyes open with a gasp, my sweat-drenched skin pressed against Manuel's warm body. My eyes darted around wildly, searching for the sky, but I couldn't find it.

"Athena, what is it?" I couldn't peel my gaze off the curtains where the moon and stars were supposed to be staring back at me.

He cupped my face, his nose brushing against mine. *"Athena, look at me."*

I couldn't look at him. I couldn't move. I couldn't breathe.

"Window," I whispered, my voice trembling in the silence. *"Open the curtains."*

He shot off the bed, rushing to the French window. It wasn't until the curtains slid open and a splash of silvery-white moonlight filtered through that I was able to inhale a deep breath. Then he cracked open the windows and the night sounds rushed in—the waves crashing against the shore, crickets chirping.

Manuel returned to my side, taking my hands between his and watching me with a worried frown.

“Thank you,” I whispered, my voice trembling and my fingers ice cold.

“What was the dream about?” he asked softly.

I couldn’t find the words to describe it because it wasn’t a dream. They were memories, terrorizing me. Of that night I was shoved in a box. I wanted to forget, yet I knew it would stay with me forever.

I glanced at the clock and saw the time. 3:15 a.m.

I threw myself into his arms.

“I don’t remember,” I lied, pressing my face against his naked flesh. He wrapped his arms around me in a protective embrace. “Just stay with me.”

We slid beneath the covers and I focused on his chest rising and falling. My skin itched as the images clawed at me and my scar burned, but I ignored it all.

I felt safe in Manuel’s arms, my husband.

I kept my cheek pressed against his chest for hours, my eyes zeroed in on the stars that twinkled until the first flickers of dawn splashed against the sky.

Knowing that sleep wouldn’t find me again, I shifted slightly so I wouldn’t disturb him. I slid out of the bed, pulled on yoga pants and a loose shirt, grabbed my phone, and tiptoed out of the bedroom and through the silent house.

I hadn’t explored each corner of this place, and I didn’t have anything else to do. I fumbled my way through the different wings, amazed at the beauty of it. Most of the architecture had been modernized, but the old charm of the castle was still preserved. There were stone walls, arched ceilings, and marble floors in almost every room—the kitchen, all three of the living rooms, the dining room, the office, and the library. *Oh, the library.* It was everything I could’ve ever wished for.

The doors that led inside were carved from oak with stained-glass scenes depicting the goddess of wisdom, Minerva.

I placed my hand on the door and pushed it open, revealing a brand-new world.

“Holy shit,” I whispered, gaping at the room that had somehow remained stuck in the fifteenth century. The stone walls were hung with rich tapestries, and the chandeliers cast amber light throughout.

There was a desk in the center of the space, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. A fire crackling in the fireplace and the moon filtering through half-round windows.

I looked up and gasped at the domed ceiling. It was painted with scenes from Dante's *Inferno*.

Making my way through the room, I read the titles stocking the shelves. *Confessions* by Augustine. *Meditations* by Marcus Aurelius. *The Odes* by Horace. *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri.

And... my eyes widened.

"What the hell?" I murmured under my breath. I rubbed my eyes, wondering whether I was seeing things. "What are my books doing here?"

My voice traveled through the empty room as I stepped closer to the book-filled shelves. One in particular stood out from the rest, its pages marked with green tabs. I reached for it, flipping through the familiar words and pages... until I heard footsteps behind me.

I whirled around to see my husband in the doorway in nothing but pajama pants, his torso bare and his muscles flexing. My fingers itched, fighting the desire to drag my nails down his smooth skin.

He'd paused at the threshold and was watching me.

"You wear glasses?" I asked in surprise.

He pulled off his wire-framed glasses, making his way over to the desk in the middle of the room and tossing them on it.

"Only when I read," he stated, and it was only then that I noticed he held a book. I gaped. It was one of mine.

"What... what is that?"

"My favorite of yours," he answered, his brows rising suggestively while my face burned.

"You... you read romance novels?"

"I do now." I narrowed my eyes. "Don't be surprised, *amorina*. I have to know what I'm competing with."

"What are you competing with?" I breathed.

"Your imagination." My mouth dropped. "Besides, it's a good book. I got everyone I know to buy a copy."

The words slowly sunk in. "Everyone you know?"

"Everyone," he repeated, smiling rakishly. "All men need tips, even Italians, and there's information in your books we can benefit from. Especially if I'm going to keep up with my young wife."

That shocked the hell out of me. "You don't need any pointers."

"*Grazie*." He tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "I'm a big fan of the ones that have all the green tabs." My eyes widened as he kissed me on

my lips. "I can show you what I learned."

He watched me with a look so soft the butterflies in my stomach took flight. It was starting to happen a lot around him.

He closed the distance between us, placing a light kiss on my nose. Then he kissed me until I was out of breath, clutching to him for dear life.

"I want to know everything about you, wife," he said softly, his lips brushing against mine. "I want to explore every inch of you so I can take care of your every need for the rest of our lives."

My heart swelled, a heartburn-like feeling making me wonder whether this was normal.

Then he scooped me up, my ass landing on the surface of the heavy oak desk.

He fisted my hair and pulled gently, forcing me to look up at him.

"Can I show you what I learned?" he whispered hoarsely.

"Yes," I murmured, my heart drumming with all the possibilities.

THIRTY-EIGHT MANUEL



Not wasting any time, I pulled her shirt over her head and discarded it. Then I slid my hand over her flat stomach, pausing over her lower belly where my child was growing.

“Do you want me to fuck you with my mouth or my cock?” I rasped, my fingers slowly trailing further down her legs, pushing them under her yoga pants and parting her folds.

“Fuck me,” she breathed. “I need your cock.” Before I could spur into action, she added, “But I want you to record us.”

I wasn’t often surprised, but she managed to do so frequently.

“You want to record me fucking you, in this library?” I mused.

She whimpered. “I do. Any objections?”

“None whatsoever.”

“You got it.” She grinned, reached for her phone, quickly switched it off standby mode and turned on the camera. “Okay,” she said, spreading her legs wide. “I’m ready.”

“I can see that,” I groaned. Lust twisted in my belly as I stroked her sex, circling her slick opening. “You’re soaking wet.”

Her eyes fluttered shut and her breathing quickened.

“Open your eyes,” I demanded. I slid a finger inside her drenched pussy as I kissed her throat. She gasped into my mouth, arching her back. “Eyes on me, *amorina*.”

Her pretty green eyes opened, shimmering like emeralds as I thrust a finger inside her tight heat over and over again, her hips rocking into me.

I used my free hand to pull her pants and panties down her slim legs.

She kissed me frantically, feeding my hunger. Sliding my finger out, I pinched her clit and she whimpered, her hands coming up to my chest.

She hooked her fingers on the hem of my pajama pants greedily, pushing them down. In seconds, I was lining the tip of my cock up to her entrance, giving her nothing but the tip.

“Ahhh,” she gasped, squeezing tight. So fucking tight.

I pulled back, my muscles shaking with the need to be inside her. “Tell me about your dream.”

“Not now,” she whimpered. “I need you.”

This was just as torturous for me, but I had to stay strong. I needed to know what caused that haunted look in her eyes earlier. “Now, *amorina*. Or I might die before I get to fill your cunt.”

Her eyes met mine, the vulnerability in them gutting me alive.

“I was shoved into a box once,” she whispered. “I couldn’t see a thing. Just darkness. It was suffocating. I thought I was going to die.”

A small shudder ran through me and I stilled. *Cazzo*, she must have been so scared.

I cupped her face, trailing my mouth over her jaw, her cheeks, only to come back to her mouth.

“I’ll make sure every window stays open from now on,” I promised, my lips moving against hers. I ran my thumb across her jaw and she moaned. “Next time darkness comes, I’ll be there to protect you.”

The vow seared itself on my heart. Her soft eyes flicked to me, burning a small hole in my chest.

“Thank you,” she whispered, then tightened her grip on me. “Now give me what you promised. I need to see if you learned anything from my books.”

I smiled as I worked myself into her pussy with shallow thrusts. A bead of sweat trickled down my forehead as the strain of holding back built within me. I’d never fucked a pregnant woman before, and my worry for our child was stronger than my desire to fuck her hard.

When she rolled her hips for more, I slid out, only to slide back all the way home. I tried to go gently with her, to fuck her slowly, but her nails scraped across my back.

“Please, Manuel,” she begged, her voice whimpery. “Harder.”

That did me in. I flipped her over, bent her over the desk, and began rutting into her. Her fingers clutched at the edge of the desk, her moans and grunts filling the space.

“Fuck yes. Harder, *paparino*.”

Cazzo. The woman was breaking me.

“Am I hurting you?” I would have to talk to the doctor to find out the safest options.

“No, just don’t fucking stop.”

While I held her hips, she rocked back onto my dick, meeting me thrust for thrust. I smacked her ass as I moved in and out of her, palming her breast and rolling her nipple between my fingertips.

“Who is fucking you?”

My tip pulled almost all the way out, only to thrust back in. She whimpered, her head thrashing on my shoulder.

“Who is?” I repeated, my voice guttural.

She moaned. “You are, husband.”

I powered into her again. Shivers racked my body as I drove deep again and again, the bliss so intense. She dropped onto her hands and I bent over her back, grinding and thrusting, rutting into her like an animal.

“Good girl,” I grunted. “*Sei perfetta*.”

She had a way of driving me wild, making me crazy for more. I wanted to bury myself inside of her and never leave.

“Say you’re mine,” I growled.

“God, yes... yes, yes... please,” she gasped, pushing her ass back against me.

My balls tightened, ready to spill, but I needed her to come first. I fucked her so hard I was worried I’d break her. Another flick of my finger. Another thrust. And then she shattered, pleasure rolling through her as her inner muscles clenched around me, milking me for all I had.

Her moans and whimpers urged me to ride her through her orgasm until I came apart right behind her with a roar.

I traced my mouth over her nape, peppering her skin with kisses.

“*Tu sei perfetta, amorina*,” I murmured. “I’ll make you and our baby happy.”

When my breathing slowed and I came down from my high, I found Athena staring at me over her shoulder with tears welling in her eyes.

Panic filled me in a second.

“What is it?” I rasped. “Was I too rough?”

She sniffled. “You’re being too sweet. It’s making me emotional.”

Relief crashed into me. I brought her mouth to mine for a long kiss.

After four decades, I had found what my parents were lucky enough to have. I’d take care of her, no matter what. I’d do everything in my power to make sure she knew she was safe.

To keep that promise, I was ready to break away from the Omertà.

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THIRTY-NINE

ATHENA



I couldn't complain about my wedding night. Aside from my nightmare and a slight hiccup with my mom, it was absolute perfection. And the days that followed were just as magical.

We had fallen into a routine over the last two weeks.

Manuel would devour me multiple times a night, hard and fast, then slow and sweet, giving my romance novels a run for their money. In the morning, we'd have a cup of coffee together—decaf for me, of course—and then he'd go take care of work while I headed into the library to take care of mine. We spent the afternoons either sailing or walking the beach. Yes, it was December and temperatures weren't warm enough to go swimming, but they were perfect to explore the island.

My eyes danced across the screen, reading my lines with a small smile on my face. The words had never come so effortlessly and I couldn't help but feel proud. It was witty, twisted, and so fucking hot, I knew it would be a success.

"This is great," I murmured, smiling as I gave myself a pat on the back. Things were good, and island life was even better. Somehow I'd started to think of all this as my home, although I knew it had everything to do with my husband.

My husband.

I was still getting used to calling him that, but I had to admit that I felt undeniably possessive of him. I'd rather die than let another woman touch

him. Even when I caught women looking his way during our strolls around town, I had to fight the urge to claw their eyes out.

Definitely not something I was proud of, but he didn't seem to mind it.

My mom and I had come to a truce. We avoided talking about my marriage, but she was genuinely curious about my pregnancy. I shared all my appointment results with her, and celebrated Doctor Ferrera's confidence that the baby was perfectly healthy.

I glanced at the clock. I had about an hour before my appointment in town.

I leaned back in the chair, stretching my arms above my head before bringing them down to my chest. My lungs expanded, happiness swimming through me. Closing my eyes, I hummed the first note, and before I knew it, I started singing.

For the first time in forever, I sang the familiar words of arias, letting the notes fill me. This wasn't for my mother. It wasn't to captivate an audience. It wasn't to impress.

It was simply for me.

After what could have been hours, I opened my eyes to find Manuel standing there, staring at me with a look of disbelief.

"It was you," he breathed.

My brows furrowed. "What was me?"

"That kid I caught singing eleven years ago," he said, and realization settled. He didn't remember that kid he caught. Had never connected the dots. "The girl who kicked me and bolted."

I smiled sheepishly.

"I thought you knew." He shook his head and worry flooded my mind. "Are you mad?"

"Am I mad you kicked me? No." He dragged his hand through his hair. "Am I mad your mother used you like that? Fuck yes."

I shut my laptop and stood up, wrapping my arms around him. "She didn't really have a choice. She couldn't sing that day because her vocal cords were damaged."

"She should have informed the opera house and postponed the show, then; not used you."

"We needed the money," I protested weakly. It wasn't until I was an adult that I learned the opera house actually fronted Mom the money. We could have left for the States immediately after the Triads' attack. Instead,

she lingered, giving them a chance to attack me a week later and bury me in a box, effectively guaranteeing a life filled with terrible memories.

Manuel cupped my cheeks. “You don’t believe that, *amorina*.”

“Honestly, I’m not sure why she insisted I do it,” I admitted. “Or why we stayed after you discovered what we’d done.”

His expression turned thunderous. “Maybe because she was busy scheming how to appear as a victim.”

My brow furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean?”

He made a dismissive noise in the back of his throat. “About a week after that performance, I got an urgent call from the *carabinieri*.” I scrambled for the word in my ever-growing vocabulary and couldn’t find it. “Police force,” he added. “She bribed the hospital staff to admit her, lying about being attacked. She had them call me, making it sound like she was on her deathbed.”

I stiffened, my mind shuffling through the events of that week. The attack in our apartment. The performance. Then a week later when... the box...

Oh, Mom, what did you do?

Goose bumps rose on my skin while dread weighed on my chest.

“A week after the performance?” I asked with a tremor.

“Yes.”

A single word changed everything, and my relationship with my mother would never be the same.

FORTY ATHENA



Manuel's phone rang and he cursed under his breath. I wrapped my fingers around his forearm and squeezed it. "Take care of that. I'll use the time to finish up my book," I lied. "You'll let me read your book before your fans get it, right?" He raised a brow when I didn't answer. "Right, *moglie*?"

Damn, I loved it when he called me his wife. I'd been learning more Italian, thanks to my app and my patient husband. "*Certamente*," I answered, smiling. "Now answer that."

As per usual, he answered the phone and disappeared, probably back into his office. He didn't discuss business around me, and I was perfectly fine with that. Especially today. The moment I could no longer hear his booming voice or his footsteps, I pulled out my phone and made my own call.

My mother answered on the first ring. "Athena."
I wasted no time. "The night the Triads buried me alive, where were you?" There was a stretch of agonizing silence, the kind filled with deceit, blood, and betrayal. "Where were you, Mother?"

I could feel the adrenaline rushing through my veins, making my heart pump hard and fast. She finally broke the silence. "I was at the hospital."
My heart tripped. "Why?"
Maybe she'd been attacked too? Maybe she fell ill. Maybe...

“I pretended Manuel’s enemies got to me. That they beat me.”

I let out an incredulous breath, struggling to believe anyone would go to such lengths. “Why?”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Not that long,” I hissed. “I remember every second of that night.”

“He refused to take my calls,” she finally answered. “I wanted him to give me another chance.” Then, as if she remembered how selfish that sounded, she added, “For us.”

Maybe I’d been seeing my mother through rose-colored glasses for years or maybe I was too young and naive to understand back then, but I could finally hear the words my mother was saying. I finally saw her for who she was.

An insecure, selfish woman who used men to get what she wanted.

“It wasn’t for me.” My lungs squeezed painfully and I tapped my chest to release some of the pressure. “I screamed for you. I was terrified they hurt you after what I witnessed in the apartment when they came in the middle of the night. And you were safe and sound in a hospital bed!”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“I was almost burned alive.” Tears gathered in my eyes and spilled over my cheeks. I angrily wiped them away with the back of my hand. She didn’t deserve my tears or this pain.

“How was I supposed to know the Triads would be back?”

“They said they would be, Mother. They warned you, and the Triads don’t make empty threats.” I hated the tremor in my voice. The scar from that night burned against the thin material of my dress against my shoulder blade. “You know that as well as I do.”

“You survived. Just a minor burn and a few bruises.”

My knees shook with memories of that night. The smoke that scratched at my throat and the terror of waiting for the flames to envelop me.

“Who saved me?” I asked. I couldn’t remember much, but I remembered that. I remembered blue eyes ordering me to breathe. “Was it my uncle Lykos?”

“No, it was Danil.” I staggered backward into a bookshelf as I let my mind whirl in muted shock and chaos. How could I not remember him? But then the words he said when Manuel and I ran into him came back to me. *You weren’t supposed to get pulled into this fucked-up world, Athena Kosta.*

And the missing puzzle piece fell into place.

The man who saved me had spoken similar words that night.

I don't want you wrapped up in this fucked-up mafia world, Athena Kosta. I'll ensure nobody can find you from now on.

Reeling from the realization that Danil was the one who saved me all those years ago, I wondered why he hadn't said anything when we ran into each other. He pretended like he'd never met me.

"He brought me back to you?" I asked, struggling to make sense of it all.

"No, he took you to the hospital." My mother sounded annoyed now. "It was convenient that I was there already." No wonder Danil sounded like he didn't like my mother. "Of course, your uncle showed up too, eager to gang up on me. But you were my daughter, and they couldn't take you from me without risking exposure, so they agreed to provide for you and your safety. Danil paid Cassidy Tech to ensure you were untraceable and Lykos paid for all your expenses. Idiots kept fighting over who was more responsible for you."

The lump in my throat grew with the realization that the two men cared about me enough to fight in the first place.

"Why didn't you let me go with them?" My voice was quiet, resigned. The rose-colored glasses were off and they'd never come back on—not where my mother was concerned.

She laughed, the sound bitter and angry. "And be left at the Triads' mercy? No, thank you. As long as you were with me, their protection touched me too. Besides, they both recognized that if you went to live with them, the Triads would learn that you survived. Cutting off all connections with you was safer for you."

My head understood everything she was telling me, but my heart struggled to keep up. I didn't know how she could be so indifferent and use me in this way. My baby wasn't even born yet and I already knew I'd rather die than do anything that could even remotely cause her or him harm.

"Why would you be at your lover's whims?" A lot of things still made no sense and my mind was revolting trying to comprehend the depth of my mother's schemes. "Why tell me it was thanks to them that you could support me? Or that you needed their protection?"

"You can be so naive," she scoffed, her voice chilling me even through the phone. "I knew Danil and Lykos would cut me off from you and take

away their protection at the first opportune moment. And now they have. So I'll do what I must to survive."

Then the line went dead, and for several heartbeats, I stared at my phone, my mother's name staring back at me as the last call, and her long gone.

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FORTY-ONE

ATHENA



The local Ob/Gyn on the island that Manuel and I selected was a female with a local office only twenty minutes from our home. Doctor Ferrari was in her late twenties and beautiful, but it was her bedside manner that had me thrilled with her. Not that Dr. Alleghri's bedside manner was bad, but Manuel made it clear no male doctor would be delivering our baby.

It was a small compromise I gave in—partly because I didn't want a male doctor staring at my muff on a regular basis because when my stomach got round and big, there was no doubt there would be a forest dominating my coochie.

Yeah, a female doctor was so much better.

"Could I get a recording of it, please?" I asked Dr. Ferrari as I pulled my dress back over my head. My heart was still heavy, but seeing my baby on the sonogram and hearing the strong heartbeat eased some of that weight. "Manuel was so grumpy he couldn't make it today."

"*Certamente*. I was surprised to see *Signore* Marchetti wasn't at your side."

I smiled as I turned around to face the young female doctor. We clicked from our first visit, and I was so grateful she'd be delivering my baby when the time came.

"He got pulled in for a meeting at the last minute," I explained, smiling. "I tried to tell him not much would change from last week."

She chuckled. "It's good he's so invested."

I nodded. “He’s been amazing so far, but sometimes it’s nice to go out alone.”

“You’re independent. Italian men aren’t used to that.”

I smiled softly, smoothing a hand down my still-flat stomach. “I actually don’t mind it as much as I thought I would.”

“Because you love him,” she said gently, drawing my eyes to her in surprise. “It’s easy to see. And he loves you. You’ll have a beautiful family.”

My heartbeat skipped, then fluttered in my chest. Did I love Manuel? I’d always subscribed to my mother’s views on love, but ever since discovering the truth about my upbringing, I’d started to see things differently.

So maybe that meant—

A loud thud startled me out of my thoughts and Umbrio busted through the door, looking dangerous and frazzled in a dark suit, his earpiece visible. The guy was at least six and a half feet tall and had the muscle mass of a mountain.

“Hey, I could have been naked,” I protested.

“Never mind that,” he said, flicking a glance at the doctor. “Is there another way out of here?”

Two more guards entered before one slumped to the ground. He was spread eagle, blood pooling all around him with a large slash across his back.

“What’s happening?” I asked, my eyes darting between my guards. “Umbrio?”

He barked orders in Italian that I couldn’t follow.

“*Cazzo*,” Dr. Ferrari muttered, her demeanor calmer than mine. “The emergency exit is down the hallway. It’ll make you an open target.”

The sound of a gunshot pierced the air and the men sprung into action, surrounding me and the doctor.

“Shit, I’m so sorry,” I said, taking the woman’s hand in mine, although I wasn’t sure whether it was to comfort her or myself.

She managed a weak smile. “Everything will be okay.”

Another shot rang out and I tried to peer around Umbrio’s wide shoulders. I could only manage quick, sharp breaths, and not knowing what was waiting for us behind the door was only making matters worse for my racing heart.

Umbrio and his men fired their guns, and it wasn't long before bullets were raging all around us.

"We have to try for the emergency exit," Umbrio barked at one of his men. "The door. Cover us."

"I can shoot," the doctor said. "I can stay behind and cover you too."

My eyes widened as I took in my badass doctor with fresh eyes.

Umbrio handed her one of his guns and she changed the magazine as she shoved through the men, taking cover behind the door.

"Go now," she hissed, taking a few shots.

Umbrio's fingers wrapped around my wrist. "You are to stay behind me."

I grabbed his belt and held on for dear life as he guided us toward the emergency exit. One step. Two steps. I winced with each ear-splitting sound but stayed focused on my position behind Umbrio. Another step. More shots. Umbrio changed the magazine, never missing a beat. Two more steps.

And we were at the door.

We stepped through and out into a hallway, my body pressed to his back. My heart was drumming so loudly in my ears that it took me a moment to realize it was eerily quiet here.

Suddenly, a hand gripped my upper arm and jerked me away from Umbrio. I gasped, watching in slow motion as a bullet hit him in the back.

I spun around and a shocked gasp tore from my lips. An eternity passed before I could react, my heart breaking with the realization.

"You fucking cunt!" I screamed, lunging for my mother at the same time a strong hand yanked me back and I fell flat on my ass.

A hood was pulled over my head and I was picked up off the ground, then thrown over a bony shoulder.

I tried to cry for help.

"Shut the fuck up or I'll snap your neck."

I stilled as all my thoughts rushed to my baby. I had to calm down, I had to think rationally.

I heard the sound of a car's engine followed by a door opening. I was thrown onto a firm leather seat and told once again to stay quiet.

As I lay there, the metal of a seat belt digging into my hip, I could think of only one thing: I would never get the chance to tell my husband how much I loved him.

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FORTY-TWO MANUEL



My phone rang again and I let it go to voicemail—*again*. I didn't tolerate interruptions when I was on a call with the Omertà members. Today's topic was particularly tense as we discussed the status of the Romero girls who were still missing. Their father was ready to wage all-out war to bring them back—not that I could blame him.

The sheer terror of someone causing harm to my unborn child or my wife caused a tightness in my chest. I'd lived among violence my entire life and it had never bothered me.

Until now.

Now it made me paranoid that destiny would catch up to me and it'd be my family that would pay for my sins. And that wouldn't fucking do.

I drummed my fingers restlessly. Athena was in town right now and I regretted not going with her, but this call couldn't be rescheduled.

My cell rang again and I flicked a glance at the screen. The moment I saw Umbrio's name, a feeling of dread took shape in the pit of my stomach.

I muted the call.

"What happened?" I barked into the phone.

"The Triads," he wheezed, his breathing labored. "Someone must have betrayed us. It was an ambush. They knew we'd be there."

"Cazzo. Where is my wife?"

"They grabbed her." I squeezed the cell in my hand. "I've been shot, but the bulletproof vest eased the hit. Before I could get myself together, they were gone."

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“Did you see who took her?”

“No. I made it near the emergency exit and then I was down. The moment I was up, I called you.”

Dread spread through my body like poison, the voices on my call nothing but white noise as I attempted to think rationally.

“Does she have her wedding ring on?” Unbeknownst to Athena, I had a tracker inserted in her ring even though I hoped I’d never have to use it.

Umbrio coughed. “I don’t know.”

I disconnected the Omertà call, then put Umbrio on speaker as I pulled up the tracking app. The software instantly connected and a red dot blinked, displaying my wife’s whereabouts.

Cazzo, the distance was growing by the minute.

“They didn’t waste any time. They’ve taken her off the island,” I gritted. “Can you get back to the castello or should I have someone pick you up?”

“I’ll be back in thirty minutes.”

I cut the line and called my men in. Time was of the essence.



I replayed the video of the masked men barging into the doctor’s office a thousand times, searching for any clues I might’ve missed. Something was nagging at me, but I couldn’t put my finger on what. Their intel was from someone close to us because they knew exactly where they were going, bypassing all the other doctors’ rooms until they reached Athena’s.

How did the Triads know she was on this island? Nobody, not even the Omertà, knew I had a place here. Did they have a contact at the hospital? Did someone alert them of her appointment?

“There’s someone here to see you, *Signore Marchetti*,” one of my men announced, cutting into my spiraling thoughts.

“I’m not taking visitors,” I barked, shoving a gun in my ankle holster.

I continued to stare at the red dot flashing on my phone screen, terrified it would disappear if I so much as blinked.

“I’d say it’s a perfect time for a visit.” A familiar voice had my head snapping up. Danil Popov and Soren stood in the doorway of my office, dressed for combat.

Something dark and hungry for destruction awakened inside my chest. In the blink of an eye, I was on him, my gun shoved against his throat.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I bellowed. “Who are you working with?”

Nobody was supposed to find us on this island. Fucking nobody.

A black hole threatened to swallow me at the thought of losing Athena. An abyss of darkness unleashed, eager for slaughter and punishment.

“You need my help,” Danil stated calmly, ignoring my gun pressed against his Adam’s apple.

“Did you betray your own sister?” I hissed.

“I didn’t,” he said matter-of-factly. “I told Enrico her mother was not to be trusted. You should have heeded my warning.”

Soren’s hand came to rest on my shoulder and I wanted nothing more than to slice it off.

“Manuel, be practical. Why would we be here if we were working with the Triads?” He was making sense, but when it was my wife and unborn child who were in danger, it was impossible to keep a level head. “We’re here to get Athena back.”

I glanced between the two men, the sheer terror of losing Athena setting my teeth on edge.

“Forgive me for not believing a word coming out of your mouth,” I said, snarling at him like a wild dog. I still remembered the words of the Triads’ man we tortured in the dungeon.

To his credit, Danil remained calm, unaffected by my temper.

“The only thing I want is for Athena to be safe. She’s been through enough.” The haze of fury slowly cleared and I could hear the sincerity in his voice. “I’ve watched over her from the shadows since she was twelve. Since the Triads tried to bury her alive.”

I took a step back, still clutching my gun but no longer aiming it at Danil.

“Explain,” I hissed.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I knew of Athena from the moment she was born, although my father didn’t. Not at first.”

“You need to speed this up,” I gritted. “Every minute counts and I need to get my wife back.” Or I’d lose my goddamn mind. “And if there’s even a scratch on her, I’m taking down every fucking organization on this planet.”

“Fuck,” Soren muttered, rubbing his eyes with his fingers.

"I'm sure you did your homework," Danil continued, "so you know about my father fucking over the Triads, the Albanians, and the Cortes cartel, but you should also know we... *I* settled those cash debts. Except there was one thing that no amount of cash could settle."

Dread pooled in my stomach. I suspected this was the missing piece that I was searching for.

"What was that?" I asked.

"The death of an innocent child."

"You're not making any sense."

"After Lykos Costello kicked Alexandra out, she set my father's house on fire, burning it to the ground... along with a baby. Qian Long's sister."

I froze, struggling to find the words. I expected a lot of fucked-up shit from Alexandra, but that was unfathomable. Qian Long was the current head of the Triads, and he was as ruthless as he was unforgiving.

"Alexandra killed a baby?" I asked, my voice sounding strange to my own ears. The Triads had the mentality of an eye for an eye. And if they knew of Athena's pregnancy—

Porca puttana!

When I got my hands on Alexandra, I would make the vindictive bitch pay. Losing my wife would destroy me—break me—and Alexandra knew that.

"Her mother told the Triads where to find us," I choked out. "Where to find my wife."

There was no other explanation. Athena even told me her mother sounded excited when she spoke to her last.

That lying, conniving bitch.

Danil nodded. "It's how we knew. We had her phone bugged."

Cazzo.

And I brought that fucking traitor into my home. "And your meeting with the Triads a few weeks ago?"

I couldn't trust anyone. Not when it was my wife's life in danger—our child's life.

"I wanted to arrange a marriage," Danil explained. "Between the Triads and the Popov family. To bring peace."

I was surprised my teeth didn't crack from how hard I was clenching them.

"You were going to marry her off," I snarled. "*My* woman."

“That was Qian’s conclusion too,” he explained calmly. “He assumed I’m trying to marry Nicki or Athena to him.”

“And you aren’t?”

“No. My intention is to marry the woman everyone presumed dead.” I stared at him, waiting for an explanation. I didn’t have to wait long. “Mei Long.”

“How does one marry a dead person?” I said, my voice cool and detached.

The room went silent as we stared at each other.

“See, that’s just it,” he said, throwing his arms out. “Alexandra let the Triads believe she killed the girl, when in fact she’d taken the baby to the States.”

I frowned at him. “Why would she do that?”

“Haven’t you learned yet?” Danil stated, his expression dark. “Alexandra Kosta is a vindictive, spiteful bitch. Think about it, what better way to get back at my father than to make him a permanent target?”

“Except it backfired,” I pointed out. “She became the target too.” And so did Athena.

“It did,” he confirmed. Something was still off. Alexandra wasn’t that stupid to think the Triads would have let her live. The Triads knew Atticus wasn’t anywhere near Greece when his home was set alight.

“I’m assuming Atticus told them Alexandra did it?”

“Yes. When the Triads learned Atticus’s mistress had started the fire, they went after her, but she had long disappeared. Then she reappeared in Italy with a child, and they went after Athena. It was only then that my father learned he had another daughter.”

“Because they stopped coming after him.”

Danil nodded. “Instead, they got their hands on Athena while her mother was on a fool’s errand to get her lover back... You.”

“I was never her lover,” I gritted. “And if you did your homework, you would know that.”

He shrugged. “Honestly, I didn’t give a shit back then and I still don’t now. My sister was all that mattered; she’s innocent in all this.”

“You’re the one who paid Nico Morrelli to wipe all traces of Athena.” That was the reason finding her was impossible. Until destiny put her back in my path.

He nodded.

“I did. When she left her at boarding school, I stopped covering Alexandra. It was better that way, what with her being an opera singer and easily trackable.”

“Why didn’t you approach Athena?” It was impossible to miss the bitterness in my voice. “She could’ve used a family.”

“It was safest for her. But then my father, in his own quest to find her, inadvertently exposed the truth that she was alive and well. So the hunt for Athena resumed.” Danil pushed his hand through his hair. “He considers Athena his second chance in life.”

It was incomprehensible that Atticus Popov—the man who traded flesh—had a weak spot, and that it was his illegitimate daughter.

Unless he wanted to use her too.

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FORTY-THREE

ATHENA



I was going to throw up.

Not seeing where we were going, my motion sickness was flaring up. I kept swallowing hard, trying to think about anything other than this nausea or rising panic.

The car door creaked open and someone yanked the hood off my head, the bright sunlight blinding me. Before my vision could adjust, a hand wrapped around my upper arm, dragging me along.

I struggled against the man's hold and tried to get my bearings when I realized I was being dragged toward a freaking super yacht.

No, no, no.

I was being taken further away from Manuel with each minute. My legs were shaking, but I kept going. I couldn't show them I was weak.

I'd fight to stay alive for my baby.

Your daddy will come for us, I thought silently, fighting the urge to hold my belly.

Once on the yacht, they left me alone as the crew busied with the anchor and untying the ropes. I seemed to be of little interest to my captors, and too soon, there was nothing but blue ocean as far as I could see.

My hands clutching the rails, I decided I couldn't just wait around for my husband to come to my rescue. I needed to gather intel. Get some answers.

Or better yet, jump off the boat and swim ashore. No, that wouldn't do. The cool temperatures might threaten hypothermia before reaching the

coast.

Taking measured, even breaths, I shook the thought away and let my sea legs carry me down the polished deck. It didn't take long to come face-to-face with *him*.

"Little Athena, we meet again," came the voice of my living nightmare.

I sucked in a breath and stared at the darkest eyes I'd ever seen. A face that had terrorized me for years, with high cheekbones and thick dark hair. He might have had a mask on when he shoved me into that box all those years ago, but those eyes and that voice were impossible to forget.

"I'm not so little anymore," I hissed, straightening my shoulders. He terrified a little girl, but I refused to let him scare the woman I'd become.

The air suddenly became charged with electricity, dark and dangerous. I gripped the rail to steady myself.

"Welcome aboard, Mrs. Marchetti. I've been looking for you for a very long time."

I swallowed hard, the voice too familiar for comfort.

"Since you know my name, it's only fair you tell me yours." I forced myself to stand with my chin held high, ignoring the tremor in my voice. "And why is my mom working with you?"

"Qian Long." My eyes narrowed as he took an exaggerated bow. "And it seems your mom sold you out to save herself."

He smiled—a cold kind of smile that sent chills down my spine. Anyone in the mafia world who valued their life knew of this man, and he wasn't known for his kindness. He was known for causing fear and terror anywhere he went.

The head of the Triads.

The man who had tried to bury me and set me on fire eleven years ago. Everything from that night was distorted in my mind, but this man had haunted me since.

What was he planning to do to me? If his intention was to kill me, he'd have done so already.

"Why?" I breathed.

His brows arched. "Why what?"

"Why does she have to save herself from you?"

He shrugged, shoving his hands into the pockets of his linen slacks.

"Your father started it, your mother took it to another extreme, and I'm going to finish it."

“It makes no sense,” I said more to myself than him. “Why would Mom betray me? She’s always protected me.”

“Something about a stolen lover,” he said coldly. “Being discarded for the last time.” Shock rolled through me at those words. Maybe he was lying, but I didn’t think this man would bother with such frivolities.

My concern was my mother’s betrayal. She had to have been the one to give the Triads my location. After all, she knew about my appointment today. Damn it, why did I tell her? She seemed amicable, so I was trying to return the sentiment. After all, she was my mother and I wanted her to be part of my life.

“Someone had to die,” he continued casually. “She reached out and offered you up as a sacrificial lamb.”

Oh. My. God.

She had thrown me to the wolves because she was... jealous. The inner turmoil her betrayal caused felt like a lash against sensitive skin.

The only blessing in disguise was that Manuel hadn’t come with me to the clinic. Otherwise, they would have hurt him too or, even worse, killed him.

I cast a glance down at my bare feet, only now realizing I’d lost my shoes at some point.

“What did my father do? What happened to set everything in motion?” I asked, focusing on keeping him talking. I had to buy time. Manuel could be looking for me already.

He let out a sardonic breath that pulled my eyes back to his face. “Not your father, your *mother*.”

I gave him a confused look. “What do you mean?”

“Your father’s indirect actions led to your mother setting his house on fire, along with my baby sister.”

My lips parted as a gasp tore from my lips. “Wh-what?”

He studied my face while the tense silence stretched. “You didn’t know?”

I swallowed. “N-no. She said she burned the money, not a—”

I couldn’t say the word, not comprehending her actions. Did I know my mother at all?

“Why would she do that?” I rasped as tremors started in my hands and quickly spread. “And why would you let her get away with it?”

He tilted his head pensively. “Hmm, interesting.”

“What?”

“Are you saying I should kill your mother?”

I closed my eyes, putting a hand to my chest as I dragged in a breath. Could I tell him he should kill my mother? I believed in justice, and she’d already betrayed me in the worst way.

“I’m saying I understand now why the Triads have been after us and that I’m surprised you let her live.” *And that it took you this long to find us*, I wanted to add, but it was best not to egg him on.

In the criminal world, my mother’s death would seem like a fair punishment. Or maybe I was more bloodthirsty than I thought.

“You’re more like your father than you know,” he stated.

“Somehow I don’t think that’s a compliment,” I muttered.

His mouth curved slightly, barely reaching his humorless eyes.

“Don’t worry, Athena Marchetti, your mother won’t survive her betrayal,” he said softly, menace threading through every word.

I couldn’t speak, staring at the stranger who’d just tilted my world on its axis. My own mother... How could I have been so damn blind and trusting that I missed it?

“So you’re going to kill her?”

He smiled coldly. “I won’t have to, because if your husband doesn’t kill her, Danil or Atticus will.”

I felt a smile tug at my lips. It turned out this man was right. I was born into this life of crime—bloodthirstiness, violence and danger ran through my veins. There was no changing that. Maybe I was fucked up all along for not admitting it to myself.

Or maybe you don’t want to risk your baby being hurt by your mother’s actions like you were, my brain reasoned. Yes, I liked that explanation a lot better.

But before I could ponder any further, Qian darted toward me and clasped a meaty hand around my wrist.

“Where are you taking me?” I said, struggling against his hold as he dragged me down the deck, his fingers biting into my flesh. Pain jolted from my wrist to my shoulder, but I ignored the pain.

“We’re going to finish what we started eleven years ago.”

Terror shot through me. I dug my heels in, my survival instinct kicking in in full force. I couldn’t die, not like this. I swung my fists and legs, clawing at him and even managing to slash my nails across his face.

He grunted, but rather than smash my skull in, he had me subdued within seconds so I couldn't move, his arms trapping my back against his chest.

"Don't push me or this will get ugly," he hissed. "I'd hate for your husband to find your body in pieces before we get to the part where he gives me everything I ask for."

I swallowed my panic and opened my eyes to find myself in a room with nothing but a single wooden crate in the middle. Holes had been drilled into the sides and there was a symbol on top of the box that was identical to the tattoo that had haunted me for over a decade.

A symbol etched into the open mouth of a skull.

Before I could ask about it, he nudged me forward, but my feet stayed glued to my spot, refusing to move. My body trembled and tears sprung to my eyes. The thought of being shoved into a box again paralyzed me, causing the room to close in on me until all I could hear was my own drumming pulse.

Desperate to stay calm, I inhaled a deep breath, but oxygen only fed my terror. The truth was, I was still that twelve-year-old girl whose fate was about to be sealed.

Before I could find the courage to fight, he shoved me toward the box again. Harder. "Get in."

I stumbled onto my knees but was quick to jump up and glare at him.

I locked eyes with him. "Please, I have nothing to do with your sister or this world you're part of. You can't put me in there."

I hated the fear in my voice, but I couldn't go through this again. Just the thought of being in there made all the oxygen evaporate from my lungs.

Qian reached behind his back, pulled a gun out of his waistband, and pointed it at me. "Get in or I'll blow your brains all over this floor and make your husband clean it up."

I was a fool to think I could reason with this man. He was as unhinged as they came, evidence of it in his dark gaze staring back at me.

He crowded me, gun raised, as he wrapped his free hand around my hair, forcing me down and shoving me inside.

My scalp burned and I whimpered in agony, but the worst part was hearing the door to the box shut, leaving me in darkness once again.

"Get comfortable," he drawled. "It might be a while before your family finds you."

I banged my fists against the wood. “Don’t leave me here,” I screamed. Another door shut, leaving me behind while I sobbed.

I started to hyperventilate, ignoring the pain in my hands from my futile attempts at breaking out.

I cried. I screamed. I cursed.

My throat turned raw. My strength vanished.

Closing my eyes, I prepared for the worst.

I wouldn’t—couldn’t—beg for mercy, yet as I expected this to be the last few hours of my life, I mourned for the future my child would never have. I regretted not recognizing the signs of my love for Manuel. I wished he could know, wished that I’d told him how crazy I was for him.

My husband. My lover. My protector.

I loved him.

And now... now it was too late to tell him.

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FORTY-FOUR MANUEL



I wanted to murder Alexandra, but finding my wife was the priority. I sent a message to Lykos, requesting his help, and tabled all my vengeful thoughts.

Sitting in the back of the sleek speedboat flying across the water, droplets of saltwater brushing against my face, I checked my weapons. Danil, Soren, and Umbrio were doing the same, and I leaned forward to ask, “We have satellite images of the yacht. *Si?*”

I needed the yacht’s layout and an idea of how many men we were dealing with.

“Yes. He only has twenty men on the yacht with him—ten on the lower deck and the remainder scattered around.”

Too many.

Soren chuckled. “It’s his mistake.”

Rumors were that Soren once battled through fifty men on his own before he was joined by his men. It was how he got his scar. So I wasn’t surprised he saw this as a piece of cake. He didn’t even consider it a challenge.

The night air was crisp as we jetted across the rough waters. The moon glimmered against the dark skies, lighting the path that would take us to the only woman that mattered.

I made a vow to never waste time again because it was fleeting and precious. When I had Athena safe in my arms, I was going to live every day like it was my last.

I would tell my wife I loved her, so fucking much that it terrified me. Without her, I was a shell of a man and this life wasn't worth living.

Before long, we spotted the super yacht.

"Keep to the shadows," I instructed Danil, although I was confident he knew what he was doing. "I'm glad we went with this black boat. It'll be easier to blend in."

"Black is Qian's favorite color," Danil said wryly.

I shared a look with them. "Silencers on?"

A terse nod.

Danil promptly killed the motor and Umbrio, who used to be an Italian rowing champion, took us the rest of the way.

We swung our ropes up and climbed onto the deck. It wasn't long before we were spotted. Chaos erupted. Men scattered, picking up their weapons. I killed two before they could even reach for them.

Danil was next to me while Soren and Umbrio fell behind. We moved efficiently, careful to not alert Qian too soon and give him an opportunity to hurt Athena.

It was over quickly.

Ten Triad men were dead, and we moved to the upper deck. I scanned the area and motioned to the separate sets of stairs. We couldn't leave an open exit and potentially miss Qian if he decided to flee with Athena, so we separated. Danil and I went up the first flight of stairs.

We crept up slowly. I knew there had to be more men close by—there was no chance they hadn't been alerted to our presence.

The moment my foot took the last step, I caught a subtle shift against the far end of the deck and sneered.

Movement behind me registered a second before a garrote snapped around my neck. Dropping my gun, I got a few fingers under the cord before it could go taut, and I yanked with both hands. He was trying his fucking best to strangle me, but he didn't have what it took. I shoved him backward, ramming my skull against his.

The sound of crunching bones rang out and he screamed. Pulling a knife out of my holster, I spun around to find him clutching his bloody nose, and without wasting another second, I drove the knife into his stomach.

"Where is my wife?" I said, letting him see my fury.

"I don't know who your wife is," he wheezed.

"Don't lie to me, *stronzo*, or I'll gut you alive."

I could feel his blood leaking everywhere, coating my hands and clothes.

"I... I... don't know," he screamed. "Boss took her."

Pulling my knife from his belly, I sliced his throat and heaved him overboard.

Another two men appeared out of thin air.

Danil was shooting at the ones behind us while I focused on the men in front of me. I heard shots fired on the other side of the deck, probably Soren and Umbrio, but I ignored them.

Athena was here and I needed to get to her.

Athena

I swallowed my fear while a hum built in my throat.

Something unlocked inside me with each tune. I could feel dark shadows unfurling in my chest, rattling the bars of the cage.

The door opened and I stifled a whimper threatening to bubble up. Just as I started to think I imagined it, the footsteps sounded and I froze, waiting with bated breath. Was it a friend or a foe? I didn't know, but I couldn't remain silent.

"Wh-who's there?" I muttered.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

The box fell open and an outstretched hand appeared. "I'm here to help you."

I took it, desperate to get out of this box, and crawled out. An impeccable suit filled my view, and I lifted my gaze until our eyes met.

No, it can't be.

Atticus Popov.

But when...? How...?

I watched in muted shock as his eyes locked on me. His eyes were the exact same shape as mine, but his eye color... It was the exact same color as Danil's.

We stared at each other, my hand still in his as I searched my brain for a word—any word. My father stood in front of me and I couldn't think of a single thing to say or do.

Anguish. Relief. Regret. It all filled his stare at once, but there was something else there too.

“My beautiful, strong daughter.” It was admiration, I realized, as I listened to his voice that rang with it.

I never thought I’d meet my father. Or my brother, for that matter. Since I’d learned about them, I thought myself lucky to have never crossed paths with the Popov family. Yet, now as my heart thumped painfully in my chest and I stood facing him, I wondered whether his face would be the last thing I saw.

He reached a hand toward me, and I was about to flinch when he brushed his knuckles over my cheek.

“My daughter,” he repeated, staring at me like he was in awe. “I... you... I never thought I’d have this moment.” My hand went to my stomach instinctively, and I heaved a relieved sigh at being able to breathe fresh air again. His eyes softened as he stroked my cheek gently like he’d uncovered a treasure. “I should have taken you from your mother years ago.”

I swallowed at the tone of his voice. I could tell he didn’t like her. I wasn’t quite sure that I did either. Not today; not after everything she’d done.

“Why are you here?” I asked. He might be my father, but I wasn’t ready to trust him. Besides, where in the fuck had he been the past twenty-three years? “Are you working with the Triads and my mom? Are you going to betray me too? Are you the one who betrayed us to the Triads eleven years ago?”

He narrowed his eyes.

“Never. I would never sell out my own flesh,” he said incredulously as if it was an abomination. He let out a grunt. “Your mother will pay for selling you out. I would have forgiven her for betraying me, but you... Never.”

A flicker of hope ignited in my chest. I didn’t know whether the man standing in front of me was a villain or a hero, but at this moment, I couldn’t find it in me to care. I needed to get out of here and get back to my husband. If it required teaming up with a villain, so be it. I’d do anything to protect my unborn child.

“Then please help me.” Atticus wasn’t exactly an upstanding citizen, but I had to believe there was some goodness in him if he was here now.

“I can take you away,” he offered. “To my country. To my home. To my yacht. Anywhere you want.”

I shook my head. “No, I want to get back to my husband.”

"I can protect you, Athena. Something that he has failed to do." He took a deep breath before exhaling. "Even Danil couldn't protect you, and he's watched over you for years."

"No, my husband hasn't failed," I protested. "He's saved me from the Triads several times. He had bodyguards protecting me when he couldn't be around. And this was all before he even knew why they were after me."

He stared at me for a moment, then shook his head. "It seems you and Danil get your stubbornness from me. Nicki is a disaster, just like her mother."

I tried to appear interested, but all I wanted was to get back to Manuel. To tell him I loved him.

"Please..." I swallowed roughly, my throat still raw. I had never said the word before, never having a father in my life. "Please... Dad."

It was a manipulative move, but I didn't care. It was about survival and getting back to my husband.

His eyes widened as he was stunned into silence before a huge smile stretched across his lips.

"You think of me as your dad?" I nodded, struggling to find my voice. A big part of me resisted the idea of a father who was involved in human trafficking and brought pain to so many people. But at this moment, he was my savior. "Say it again," he croaked, a genuine smile stretching across his lips.

"No." I had no idea where this strength was coming from. Maybe I recognized Atticus's hunger to be loved by his child or his resolve to have a connection with me. Whatever it was, I was determined to use it to my advantage. "Take me to my husband. Get me out of here."

He chuckled. "No wonder Danil is protective of you."

I blinked. "Why is he protective of me?"

He stepped closer to me. "He sees the fighter in you, but also a woman who's fiercely protective of those she loves."

"He couldn't possibly know that," I muttered. Except, if he had me watched for years like Atticus had said, that would make sense. "But maybe one day I could get to know him." I looked over to the door that led to my escape before my gaze slid back to him, my hope of escaping this flaring to life. "And you, *Dad*."

He seemed taken aback before he pulled me into a tight hug.

“Your husband’s on his way.” His phone beeped and he flicked a glance at it, cursing under his breath. “And so is my son.” He pushed his hand through his thick silver hair, a tattoo catching my attention. “I should have known those two would team up and shoot their way through Qian’s men.”

“What do you mean?” I gasped, my eyes locked on the familiar tattoo. Before I could dwell on the meaning of it, an alarm blasted.

“Stay here,” he ordered. “I have a game to play with Qian, but I promise you, your husband will find you. Very soon. And trust me when I say no one will hurt you again.”

And with that, he exited the room.

I stared after my only way out of here, unable to stir into action. Every fiber of me stood frozen as the seconds ticked by, trying to understand what just happened.

I was pacing the small room when the door opened. Qian came to stand in front of me, his shoulders square as he stared down at me.

“And how in the fuck did you get out of that box?”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I know a few of David Copperfield’s magic tricks.” His eyes flashed. Fuck, I was getting too brave for my own good. “What’s going on?”

“Your husband and brother are fucking maniacs,” he roared, letting the subject of my questionable magic go. “That’s what’s going on.”

My lips lifted and hope ignited in my chest, my eyes darting around as if they might appear out of thin air. “They’re here?”

A few more men barged through the door, speaking Chinese. It almost sounded as if they were bickering when an explosion rocked the boat.

“Fuck, please tell me we’re close to shore,” I muttered just as my captor shoved me to the ground.

“Stay down,” he ordered, brandishing a gun. He barked out a few orders in Chinese, and men I hadn’t noticed before sprung to action.

“What’s happening?” I breathed.

“It seems your husband and brother teamed up for your rescue mission and are determined to sink my ship.”

I grinned.

Maybe this wasn’t the end after all.

FORTY-FIVE MANUEL



The whole time I fought through the Triads, I pictured the terror in Athena's eyes, her ravaged expression, and it kept me pushing onward.

Danil and I froze as soon as we barged into the room where Athena's tracker led us.

She was surrounded by Qian and three of his men. He yanked her off the ground by her elbow and she winced, shooting him a glare.

"Jesus, take it easy." Athena got to her feet and slid her eyes my way, flashing me a soft smile. My *amorina* was safe, and by the looks of it, she wasn't hurt.

Qian had her in his clutches, his gun pressed against her temple while hatred and violence swam through my veins.

"Let her go," I gritted, barely reining in my fury. "Or I swear to God, I'll level this ship even if I kill us all in the process."

If anything happened to Athena, I'd be dead anyhow.

"I thought we had an agreement," Danil said, his voice cold.

Qian laughed. "You suggested marriage, but what good is it if the woman's married already?" He flicked Athena a bored glance. "Maybe a mistress," he pondered.

"Over my dead body."

His mouth twisted as he glared at me, but he remained silent. We both knew he wouldn't mind me dead, but I would set Athena free from his clutches first. I refused to die beforehand.

The mother of my child wouldn't be anyone's pawn.

Shaking his head, he studied me. "I'm open to shooting you right now."

"It would be a mistake to try."

"Are you two done or can we get my sister off this boat?" Danil said, gesturing between us. "Nice to see you, Athena. Been on Tinder lately?"

My wife let out a strangled laugh. "Been kind of busy. Getting married and kidnapped."

"Stop fucking dragging this shit out, Danil," Qian spat. "Clearly you were trying to fuck me over."

Danil flicked a piece of imaginary lint off his shirt while I teetered on the edge. I just wanted to shoot the motherfucker and grab my wife. But the devil wanted to negotiate.

I narrowed my eyes on the man. "Listen, give me my wife back and we'll leave you to work out shit with Danil."

"No, the rules have changed. A union between our families is no longer enough. Not with the damaged reputation your sister Nicki has."

Danil didn't miss a beat. "Actually, I was going to recommend a marriage between your sister, Mei Long, and myself, but I like the way you think. We should strengthen our business relationship with a marriage between you and my sister Nicki too. The more the merrier."

Qian's expression turned thunderous and Athena winced as his grip tightened.

"Have you lost your fucking mind, Danil, or have you forgotten that Alexandra killed my sister? You Popovs started it all." His finger on the trigger of his gun was tightening. I kept my own trained on the spot between his eyes.

"Did you ever wonder why in the fuck your sister was in my father's house in Greece?" Danil asked as he put his gun in his holster and slipped his hands into his pockets.

"Just get to the fucking point, Popov," Qian hissed. "Is Mei alive?"

Danil rocked back and forth on his heel, his eyes locked on the man.

"First things first, we'll negotiate terms."

And this was the thing that made Danil Popov successful and ruthless.

"Or maybe I'll just put a bullet in your sister's head," Qian snarled.

I growled, flashing him a menacing smile. "You put a scratch on her, Qian, and you can forget learning anything about your sister. You have three seconds to decide."

“One... two... three,” Danil counted, flashing him a cold smile. “I knew you’d choose wisely. Now, release Athena to her husband and we’ll negotiate.”

Conflict danced in his eyes as he struggled between the need to avenge and the need to learn the truth about his sister.

He shoved Athena forward and she stumbled, but I caught her as Qian aimed his gun at Danil.

“Now speak,” he demanded.

“My contacts learned of a little secret Alexandra kept,” Danil started. “You really should have gotten ahold of Alexandra when you had a chance, skinned her alive, and questioned her on the details of her betrayal. Her secrets. Instead, you let her escape for handing you Athena.”

Pezzo di merda.

I wrapped my arms around Athena, wanting to protect her from her mother’s selfishness. Her eyes locked on me, watching me like I was a king. Her king.

“I knew Atticus or one of you would get to her.” Qian wasn’t wrong. Alexandra’s days under the sun were numbered. “Now explain what the fuck you mean,” Qian barked.

He seemed to be fed up with antics just as much as the rest of us.

“She migrated back to the States, pregnant and with a baby under a fake passport. Mei Windsor, the exact same age and date of birth as Mei Long.”

No doubt Alexandra intended to use her as her trump card if the need ever arose.

His hands curled into fists at his side. “Where is she? And why wouldn’t Alexandra use that leverage to save herself and her child?”

Danil shrugged. “Because she fucked up. The Windsor family, who adopted Mei, are practically royalty. Fuck them over and you’re dead.”

“I will get her back to my country. They can’t touch her there.”

Danil let out a sardonic breath. “I wouldn’t count on it. Besides, Mei is very fond of her parents, and I suspect your way of... business won’t be to her liking.”

“Why are you speaking as if you know her?”

Danil’s lip curled into a smug, almost twisted smile. “Unlike you, I do my research. You should have really looked at your family and asked how your baby sister wound up in Atticus’s home in the first place.”

“My mother,” Qian answered flatly. “She fell in love with Alexandra during one of her visits to Greece, accompanying my father. Alexandra knew Atticus was about to dump her, so the two women planned some fairy-tale escape.”

“What?”

“What the fuck?” Danil said. “Is that a joke?”

“Do you see me laughing, Popov?”

Athena straightened but didn’t pull away. “My mother is... but no, it can’t be. She’s been chasing men for as long as I can remember.”

“Maybe she was experimenting.” Qian’s voice hardened. “But I assure you, it is true. My father beheaded my mother as a result of her betrayal.”

Silence filled the room. We all sized each other up, considering this new information.

“Where is my... Where is Alexandra?” It would seem Athena couldn’t refer to Alexandra as her mother anymore. Not that I could blame her. She had caused so much pain and suffering.

“By now, I imagine Lykos Costello has her secured in my dungeon.” Qian remained silent, his gaze locked on Athena and me. “Her days are numbered.”

I heard Athena’s soft gasp and I rubbed her back. She’d been exposed enough by now to know there wasn’t a scenario in which Alexandra Kosta remained alive. Not with the damage she caused.

“Even if your wife objects to keeping her imprisoned?” Qian demanded.

“I don’t,” Athena chimed in, her expression pale. “Object, that is. Enough is enough.” She took a deep breath before exhaling. “I would like to have one last talk with her and understand why, but I won’t ask that you spare her life.”

“Fine. I want your assurance that Alexandra Kosta will be dead by the end of the week,” Qian demanded. “No more hiding under a different name or with the head of the Spanish mafia.”

“She will,” I agreed.

“But Mei cannot marry you, Danil.” I wasn’t surprised at Qian Long’s pushback. “She’s already engaged, the agreement was signed at birth. So unless you end that entire family—”

“Consider it done.” Danil smirked, never breaking eye contact with his future brother-in-law.

“Also, if you ever get anywhere near Athena again,” I added, “I’ll ensure your last name is wiped off this planet.”

“Ditto,” Danil chimed in.

Athena’s hand squeezed mine, and I imagined all the brutality of this world was probably staggering to her.

“Now that we have that behind us...” Danil steered the conversation back to business. “After we sign a contract, binding Mei to me, and Nicki to you—”

“I don’t want your goddamned sister. I don’t need a woman who’s pining after another man. Besides, she’s fucking crazy.”

Athena snorted softly. “Look who’s talking.”

Danil shrugged. “Exactly. And it is not up for negotiation.” My brother-in-law had a death wish. “In addition, you’ll sign half of your drug and construction business to me, both in Asia and Africa.” Qian’s lip curled at the outrageous demands, but he knew they had him cornered.

“Just look at it this way,” I drawled, helping him out. “You’re investing in your family.”

“Fucking Popovs,” he muttered. “You’ve been a curse since day one.”

FORTY-SIX

ATHENA



Dr. Ferrari read my vitals in our bedroom at home, Manuel holding my hand as if he was scared I'd disappear if he let me go.

I couldn't tear my gaze away from him. Manuel had always been absurdly attractive, but his days-old stubble made me want to rip his clothes off.

"I have to tell you something," I whispered, flicking a gaze at the doctor. Ever since we left Qian's destroyed yacht, we hadn't had a moment alone. Danil, Soren, and Umbrio came back to the castle with us where my mom and the men that held her prisoner were waiting.

But before any kind of reunion could occur, Manuel carried me straight to our bedroom to be examined—for the second time in less than twenty-four hours.

The whooshing of the sonogram machine sounded like music to everyone's ears.

"I'm feeling fine," I protested again.

"Do it for me, *amorina*. I want to hear for myself that everything is alright with our child."

"Stress can be bad on the baby too," Dr. Ferrari chimed in. "Oh, I almost forgot. I got your sonogram photos from yesterday's... checkup."

The heart machine started beeping wildly.

"*Ma che cazzo?*" Manuel rasped, his eyes darting to the monitor. "Is that the baby or Athena? What's wrong?"

The doctor came over and disconnected the heart machine. “Everything’s fine. Mamma and baby are both fine.”

Manuel pressed his lips to mine. I loved the warmth of his mouth, the feel of his body close to me.

“Because she’s strong.”

“She is. Baby girl and her mamma are doing amazing.”

Our heads whipped up.

“What?” My mouth fell open. “Are we—”

“*Cazzo*,” Dr. Ferrari muttered, her head swiveling between the two of us. “I slipped. I’m so sorry. You’re having a girl.”

Manuel grinned.

“A girl,” I repeated at the same time Manuel whispered, “A baby girl.”

We shared a look, an indescribable expression on his face.

“Were you... hoping for a boy?” I asked him, uncertainty wrapping its fingers around my heart.

Dr. Ferrari left the room, the door clicking softly behind her.

Manuel straightened, his arms pulling me closer into his embrace. “I’m thrilled it’s a girl. She’ll be our little princess who’ll grow up to be a fierce queen.” He cleared his throat. “I’m the luckiest man alive.”

I pulled slightly away so I could meet his glistening dark eyes.

“I love you.” My voice cracked. “Slowly but surely, I fell in love, and I might not have known what it was at first, but there’s no mistaking it. I love you, Manuel.”

“Fuck, *amorina*.” He closed his eyes, sucking in a deep breath.

Tears rolled down my cheeks, but I didn’t bother wiping them away.

“You were right all along. Love doesn’t have to hurt. Just like you said.” I snaked my arms around his waist and looked up at him. “I love you, and you make me so happy. You make me feel safe, and whenever I’m with you, it feels like I’m... home.”

He let out a sardonic breath. “Even though I got you pregnant?”

“Like you said, it takes two.” My lips met his, and I squealed when he picked me up. My legs instinctively wrapped around his waist.

He grabbed my chin with one hand, tilting my head back so he could gaze down at me.

“Tell me again,” he demanded.

“I love you,” I breathed against his lips. “You calm my heart, mind, and soul, and there’s nobody else I trust more than you, husband.”

My back pushed against the wall and he kissed me, dominating and harsh, meant to consume me. I slid down his body, never breaking away.

His tongue thrust into my mouth, licking and causing me to whimper. There weren't any more barriers—just us and our love.

His hand slipped between my legs, along the sensitive flesh of my inner thigh, and I shivered at his touch. He bunched my panties, then ripped them off.

“Husband, my lingerie drawer will need replenishing if you keep this up,” I murmured, skimming my mouth down his stubbled chin. “And I won't go easy on your wallet.”

“I count on it. My wife deserves the best.”

Manuel eased two ruthless fingers inside me, ripping a moan from my throat. “Holy shit,” I rasped.

“You're always so ready for me, *amorina*.” His fingers started to move inside me. “So fucking wet and greedy. Just the way I love it.”

I couldn't resist the clenching, my nipples throbbing. My limbs quivered as erotic sounds left my lips.

“Tell me you love me again,” he rasped.

I smiled, my lips tingling and bruised.

“I love you. So goddamn much. You make me so happy.”

He quickly unbuckled his pants and freed his rock-hard cock. A needy moan ripped from my lips when he lifted me up, urging me to wrap my legs around him again.

He thrust inside me, filling me to the hilt. I was completely at his mercy. I wanted him to know I trusted him unconditionally. His groin hitting my swollen clit, I took all that he gave.

Pleasure mounted until all I could hear was the slap of flesh against flesh, my desperate moans and his grunts.

“I love you...” My voice trembled. “I love you, I love you...”

His pace slowed and he took my bottom lip between his teeth. “I'm forever yours, *amore mio*.”

I'd fallen so deep that I couldn't find a way out even if I wanted to. He was my lighthouse in a storm, my haven in turmoil.

“I love you,” I whispered tenderly. “Now, for the love of God, please fuck me, husband. Hard.”

Manuel drove into me. He pulled all the way out, then thrust back in, hitting my sensitive clit just right.

“Fuck... that’s it... I love you...” Stars formed behind my lids.

The orgasm that hit me was strong, unending, until I sobbed in his arms. His lips slammed against mine while he powered harder and faster through my clenching walls until his cum shot inside me.

He never stopped devouring my mouth, his tongue dancing with mine as his hot cum made a mess of my thighs and both of us shuddered through our release.

My eyelids drooped as his hot cum soaked my inner walls. I was so dazed that I forgot everything that had happened in the last twenty-four hours.

Manuel released me and tucked himself in, buckling his pants while all I could do was stare. Then he scooped me up and carried me to the bathroom where he gently wiped my thighs.

“Thank you for loving me,” I whispered. Our eyes met in the mirror and I smiled softly. “You’re the home I’ve been searching for.”

His lips brushed against mine lightly. “You’re everything I’ve been waiting for.”

FORTY-SEVEN

MANUEL



I almost lost her.

The thought was terrifying.

Athena was the only woman who had ever made me feel out of my mind with this carnal need. But it was also dark and intense, soft and consuming.

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pressed her lips to mine, kissing me with a desperation that flowed through my own bones.

"I love you," she whispered against my mouth, her breath stuttering.

If she repeated those words every minute of every day, they would still make my heart race in my chest.

"I love you too. You have my heart, *amorina*," I rasped. "Forever."

She smiled a little, her breathing evening out. "I'll be careful with it. Be careful with mine too."

"*Sempre*," I vowed, putting her hand on my chest. "I'll never hurt you."

Silence filled the space between us as she absorbed my words.

"I met my father tonight," she said, her forehead against my shoulder.

I stiffened. Had Atticus planned it with Qian? Betrayal by one parent was bad enough, but two...?

"Did he hurt you?" My voice was low but firm.

"No."

"What did he want?"

She raised her head and we watched each other for several long seconds. "He wanted me to go with him, but I wouldn't."

“I’m surprised he didn’t force you.”

“Even if he tried, I would have fought him. I wanted to get back to you.” Her voice cracked and it fucking tore at my chest. She had to be exhausted.

I helped her out of her dress and into one of my shirts, then carried her to bed.

She sighed when I slid in next to her and settled under the covers, snuggling her close. I sucked in a deep breath. “Tell me everything.”

She started with the attack at the clinic, then how she discovered her mother’s betrayal. All the things Qian had said, and then her father.

“He said Qian wouldn’t kill me because he needed me as leverage. I think he knows about Mei.”

I wouldn’t be surprised. Danil got his sharp logic and business savvy from his father.

Before I could ask her anything else, Athena’s eyelids dropped and she fell into a deep sleep, her soft snores filling the space between us.

We slept wrapped around one another, tighter than ever before.



A tap on the door pulled me awake.

I checked the clock on the nightstand to find it was only five in the morning. Athena was sprawled across my chest, breathing against my skin.

Just as I was about to go back to sleep, another knock came. I slowly eased my wife to her back and covered her, then got out of bed and pulled on a pair of pants and a shirt, not bothering to button it as I stepped out of the room, closing the door behind me.

Danil and Lykos stood in the hallway, their eyes bloodshot and a frown etched between each of their brows.

“What is it?”

“Alexandra was poisoned,” Danil spoke first.

“What? How?”

“My father. She doesn’t have much time,” he answered, running an agitated hand through his dark hair.

“She’s asking for her daughter,” Lykos grumbled. “Personally, I wouldn’t let her see Athena.”

“This is for my sister,” Danil gritted. “She’ll need closure too.”

“How in the fuck did Atticus get in here?” I hissed.

“I think he followed us from the boat,” Danil admitted.

“Fuck, Athena told me Atticus was on the boat.” Danil shot me a surprised look. “Do you have him?”

Danil let out a sardonic breath. “You clearly don’t know my father. He won’t be found until he’s good and ready.”

“What did he want from her?” Lykos demanded.

“He wanted to take her away with him, but she refused to go.”

“He must have learned Alexandra betrayed Athena and it pushed him over, igniting his anger.”

“If Atticus thinks he’ll somehow get in our good graces, he won’t,” Lykos stated. “I’ll end him.”

“I’ll kill him a thousand times over if he even thinks about hurting her.” I ran my hand through my hair. “But I don’t think that’s his intention.”

“It’s not,” Danil confirmed. “He wants to right all his wrongs as a father. He sees Athena as a second chance, but the problem is that being attached to Atticus Popov spells danger. We can’t allow that.”

“But nobody is asking you to allow me anything.” My wife’s voice came from behind and we all whirled around. “Danil, you saved my life. Twice. But that doesn’t give you the right to map out who should or shouldn’t be in my life.” Fuck, I loved this version of my wife. Somewhere along the way, she had found parts of herself that made her into a queen. My queen.

Danil flashed her a smile. “Sorry, sis. I can’t help it. But for you, I’ll try.”

Athena tilted her head, a small smile playing on her lips. “You do that, brother. For me.”

Judging by Danil’s expression, she’d surprised him. A slow grin spread over his face. “You and I will get along just great.”

“Good morning, *moglie*.” I snaked my arm around her waist and she leaned into me. “I’m sorry we woke you up so early.”

She tilted her head up for a kiss and I obliged, then she turned to look at Lykos. “And you are...?”

Fuck, that’s right. She hadn’t met her uncle yet.

“*Amorina*, this is Lykos Costello.”

Straightening, she frowned. “My uncle?”

Lykos took a step forward and extended his hand. "I'm happy to finally meet you."

Athena blinked. "I ran into you. In Paris." Lykos nodded. "Were you following me?"

"I... Your brother and I... have been watching over you for a long time now."

I pressed a kiss to Athena's forehead. "Family introductions will have to wait a bit, *amorina*. Your mom has been poisoned. She doesn't have long to live."

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FORTY-EIGHT

ATHENA



My mother's dying.

My chest felt like it was about to explode. I knew I shouldn't feel this way, considering her betrayal.

My mother had made her bed and now she was going to die in it. But it wasn't that simple. I couldn't hate her. I couldn't celebrate her death.

"Take me to her, please."

My feet bare against the Italian marble, I walked silently next to my husband, my brother and uncle behind us.

We made our way down the stairs, the space getting colder and more narrow with each step. The men's steps echoed in the stone corridor, the air getting heavier and chillier. The smell of dirt and musk was more prominent the deeper we went into the dungeons.

Manuel scooped me up and I welcomed his warmth.

"Are you okay?" he asked softly, his lips brushing against my cheek.

"Yes."

I burrowed closer into him, clinging to his strength. In such a short time, my husband and his love had become the most important to me. Our marriage might have not started out as a fairy tale, but it would end as one. I was determined to make it so.

We came to a stop and the iron door opened. There my mother sat, hunched over with her head on her knees as she rocked back and forth.

I slipped out of my husband's arms, then ran over and knelt in front of her. "Mom?"

It felt like déjà vu from all those years ago when the Triads cornered her and hurt her in our apartment. I had run to her back then too, worried about her pain.

She lifted her forehead, tears matting her hair to her cheeks. She coughed and blood trickled down the corner of her mouth.

“*Yavrum*,” came a weak voice as her unfocused eyes searched my face. My throat squeezed. I hadn’t heard her call me her baby in so long. “You came.”

“Yes,” I croaked, wrapping my arms around her while emotions crushed my lungs.

“You hate me, don’t you, *yavrum*?”

I shook my head. “I don’t.”

She might deserve a punishment, but I couldn’t find hatred in my heart. Not now.

“Your father came for me,” she said. “He made me pay.”

My blood turned cold. “W-what did he do?”

As she straightened, she winced. “He poisoned me. Because of what I did... to you.”

My stomach lurched.

“I didn’t ask him to do that.” Goose bumps covered my skin from the cold. My gaze flitted to my husband, then to my brother and my uncle. “Is there anything you can do for her?” I pleaded, tears streaming down my face.

Danil was the one who answered. “We don’t know what he gave her.”

“We can take her to the hospital,” I reasoned, although I knew the point was moot. She’d done too much damage and would forever be a target.

Mom grabbed my hand.

“Atticus will only come back to finish the job,” she echoed my own thoughts. Her eyes darted behind me. “And if he doesn’t, others will.”

My shoulders dropped.

“Why, Mama?” I asked. She turned, her eyes finding my husband. “Why so many secrets and lies? We could have been...” I didn’t know what word I was searching for. Happy? Safe? Content? “I just don’t understand,” I whispered.

She took a deep shuddering breath before exhaling.

“It all started with my parents... your grandparents.” She coughed, her body shaking, and I rubbed her back. “They were about to put me in an

asylum.”

Shock rippled through me. “What? Why?”

“Because I... fell in love...” She swallowed hard. “With a woman.”

Gasps sounded behind me but I focused on my mother and the secrets she’d kept close to her heart my whole life. Did I ever know her at all? She’d always enchanted men who readily fell at her feet. She used them for her protection and her own benefit, but she was never in love with them. She could take them and leave them without a second thought.

Was it because of that woman? Qian Long’s mother? But it couldn’t be, because according to Qian, his sister was born twenty-three years ago.

“What happened to that woman?” I breathed. “Who was she?”

“A school friend from a normal family. My parents had her killed.”

“That’s horrible,” I said, grappling with the truth about my grandparents.

She flashed me a slightly crazed smile.

“But I showed them. I avenged her, ended their lives before they could put me away.” I took in my mother’s pale face, the ghosts in her eyes that had captivated so many hearts. “Then I went to live with my sister who everyone loved. But do you want to know the funny part?”

I wasn’t sure that I did but I answered just the same. “Okay.”

“She turned out to be the crazy one.” She cackled, eyes crazed. “Their perfect daughter went insane and the one they attempted to commit turned out just fine.”

“That’s debatable.” Someone scoffed behind me and I shot a glare over my shoulder.

Mom let out a bitter laugh. “I might be a murderer, but I’m not crazy.”

I shook my head, although honestly, it was hard to agree. She had done some insane things. “You were young and needed understanding, not judgment.”

She smiled sadly, playing with her hair. “Always the good daughter.”

My heart ached for her despite the monstrous deeds she’d done. She’d been betrayed by her parents, hiding her bitterness and anger from the world. I started to think my mom’s story was a tragedy because it didn’t have to end this way, if only her parents would have given her support and understanding.

“So you didn’t really like my father? Or... my husband.”

She shrugged. "I didn't like that they discarded me," she said, the first note of sincerity in her voice. "Everyone always discards me. I'm never important enough, but my sister was."

It was then that I realized my mother's wounds were deeper than anyone could have ever fathomed, but she'd done most of the digging.

"I didn't," I pointed out.

She blinked, two heartbeats passing before she answered, "But you did, *yavrum*. When you picked him over me." A shuddering breath left me, my mother's insecurity staring back at me for the first time. Or maybe it was there all along and I was too blind to see it. "He... they..." She tilted her chin at my husband, brother, and uncle. "They will leave you. That's what people in this world do. They always leave when it suits them."

"You're wrong," I said in a low voice. It'd be a lie to say that the thought of losing my newfound family and friends didn't scare me, but my friends had been with me through thick and thin. My brother and uncle had been watching over me for years. That had to count for something and prove that they would stick by me. And that alone gave me a small relief.

She let out a breath of disbelief, interrupted by a coughing fit. "Time will prove me right."

"What about Mei Long?" Danil chimed in, cutting through my mother's attempt to plant seeds into my mind and soul. "What about her mother who was beheaded because she fell in love with you?"

"Li, the wife of the head of the Triads, was unhappy. I was unhappy. We hated this world, yet leaving it and starting over alone was... hard. But together, we were brave. I was helping her with her newborn, and we made a plan. We had so much in common even before I learned of my pregnancy. She fell in love, and slowly so did I, but I couldn't admit to it. Not to her, not to myself. Nonetheless, we were close and wanted out, so we planned our escape. Everyone assumed I set Atticus's house on fire out of jealousy, but it was to set our plan in motion."

"What was the plan?" my uncle asked.

"Get you, Lykos Costello, to cast me out," she answered weakly. Her strength was leaving her.

"And how would you have known that I'd kick you out?"

She laughed weakly. "I knew once you learned what I did for Atticus, you would have no choice. So, I made sure you found out. I went to Atticus's home where Li was waiting for me with baby Mei. She broke

down. She couldn't leave her son behind, so she begged me to keep her baby while she got her son, and she promised to meet me. I pleaded with her not to go, but she was determined. Before she left, she asked me whether I loved her. She wanted to hear those words and I wouldn't—couldn't—give them to her. I feared if I did, it would end just as it did the last time. With another death of the woman I loved on my hands.”

I was so fucking blind. Yes, I hadn't spent a lot of time with my mother since my boarding school days, but it seemed inconceivable that I had never seen it before. I didn't know my mother at all.

“So you never told her?”

“I knew in my bones it wouldn't end well, but I agreed to her plan. I took the baby and the money and I set the house on fire. Li went back to her husband to steal her son, and we were planning on meeting in New York.”

I swallowed. “But she never made it.”

This story didn't excuse her behavior or betrayal, but she had done what she thought she needed to in order to survive. It was her family and the circumstances that drove her to it.

“She didn't.” Her eyes turned misty. “We would have been so happy. The two of us and the two girls who we would have raised as sisters. If only Li didn't insist on bringing her son...”

It was wrong on so many levels that she would have wanted the woman she loved to leave her son behind.

“Did it ever occur to you if you told me, I would have helped you?” My uncle sounded slightly bitter. Maybe he could have altered the course of her life—my life—and given her the happily-ever-after that she'd always dreamt of.

“Li haunts me every day,” she admitted after a long stretch of silence. “She died, and I desperately needed to confess that it wasn't one-sided. That I felt it too. Existing without her was torture.” My eyes burned because I knew there was no saving her. She had been battling her own demons for so long that she'd become one with them. “But you, Athena, and Mei kept me going. The promise I made to Li that I would ensure her daughter was happy.”

“Is she?” I asked, finally understanding why my mother would randomly disappear during my childhood. She was visiting Mei Long, a sister that was never meant to be.

She nodded. “She is, and she’s not part of the mafia world. It’s what I wanted for both of you.”

“How did you convince the Windsor family to allow you to be part of her life?” Danil questioned. “They aren’t exactly known for letting outsiders into their family circle.”

She shrugged. “It was the clause of the adoption agreement. I got to visit Mei as her aunt so I could build a relationship with her. They thought she was my daughter, and since they were desperate for a baby girl, they agreed.”

“Jesus, Mom, why didn’t you just keep her? It could have been the three of us together.”

She cupped my cheeks, staring at me with a sad smile. “For the same reason I had to keep you away from me and send you to boarding school. It wasn’t safe. The Triads would have found her if she’d stayed with me. They didn’t know about my pregnancy, so you were safe. At least for a little bit.”

“So many secrets and lies,” I murmured, disheartened. Manuel’s hand came to rest on the small of my back in comfort, being my rock once again. It was so easy to succumb to all the secrets, but instead, I chose to surrender to his protection and love. “Weren’t you worried they’d catch up to you? Hurt everyone around me? Or your grandchild?”

I forgave her betrayal to me, but I struggled to forgive her betrayal to my baby. Her decision to hand me over to the Triads could have resulted in my baby’s death.

She waved her hand. “I knew they’d come for you—your husband, uncle, or father. As it turned out, it was all three.” I couldn’t quite excuse her based on her assumption. What if they had been too late? “I’m so tired,” she whispered, closing her eyes. “Tired of people. Endless noise. Men. I would just like to go to sleep and never wake up.”

A choked sob wrenched from my throat, the reality of her words hitting me. She would get her wish, much too soon. I cried. For her aching heart. For my own. For the cruelty of this world and humans—my grandparents—that judged her when the opposite could have helped her thrive.

Then, as if the angels finally decided to end it all and give her reprieve, she took her last breath. The invisible, cold death swept through the dungeon and silence descended, interrupted only by my soft cries.

I didn’t know how long I cried or how I found myself in the bedroom with Manuel holding me through it all, rocking me gently like I was a child.

Time was of no essence where grief was concerned.

“Your mother’s in a better place, *amorina*,” he whispered.

I lifted my head, my cheeks tear-smeared messes. “You really think so?”

He nodded.

“I know so. Trust me, this is for the better.” I knew he didn’t care for her. There weren’t many men that did, not that I could blame them considering all the havoc she caused. “Think of our baby.”

I brought my hand to my stomach, rubbing it affectionately.

“What if you end up hating me?” I blurted out, not realizing that my mother’s words managed to plant a poisonous seed of doubt into my mind. “Or Danil and my uncle? It’d be so much worse to find family and then lose it than never to have it to begin with.”

“Impossible.” He pressed a soft kiss to my forehead. “There’s a reason they like you so much. The reason I love you. Your heart isn’t dead. Alexandra’s heart has been dead for a very long time.” He cupped my tearstained cheeks, his thumb brushing against my lower lip. “Life works in mysterious ways, and ours is just beginning.”

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FORTY-NINE

ATHENA



My husband was right—life worked in mysterious ways. I never thought I'd meet my half-siblings, yet here they were, along with my uncle, attending my mother's funeral for moral support. And I'd never thought I'd find love, although I wrote about it, yet here I was with my husband who'd inserted himself into my life and been here for me through so much in such a short time.

My life had changed. Betrayals left a mark, but one thing was for certain. If it wasn't for some of that treachery, I wouldn't have found the man who not only saved me but showed me the meaning of loyalty and love. And I wouldn't have met my half-siblings and uncle who refused to run away from me.

And now, I'd reached a point in my life where I had more family than I knew what to do with and it was a damn good feeling.

It had been three days since my mother's poisoning. I cried—a lot—over the past three days because even though she had lied, manipulated, and hurt me, her life wasn't the best, and as much as the cutting ache of her betrayal was still raw and fresh, I had to acknowledge her own pain. My mother was let down by the people she loved the most. I sincerely hoped she was finally at peace.

My father came to visit me last night while my husband and newfound family were busy with last-minute funeral preparations. I was livid with him, although reluctantly, I had to agree with him. My mother was unwell,

and there was no guarantee that she wouldn't eventually come for my baby too.

I didn't even bother asking him how he knew I was pregnant. I assumed it had to be Danil who told him.

My mother's funeral came on an uncharacteristically warm December day. Sunlight splayed through the centuries-old cemetery while my family and friends came to pay their respects wearing different shades of black suits and dresses.

A light breeze tousled my dress that hugged my curves, but it was my husband's arm around me that kept me grounded, his love and care warmer than the summer sun in southern Italy.

"Just let me know if you need anything. We'll wait for you at the house." Isla squeezed my hand in comfort before drifting away with her own husband, and soon the rest followed.

I returned my gaze to the simple headstone. It read, *Alexandra Kosta Bottelli. The soprano who brought music and joy to many. May you finally find peace and love.*

Mother made many mistakes in her life. Yes, she was let down by her parents and certain decisions got her cornered, but it could have easily been different for her. If only she wasn't born into a mafia family with an old-fashioned and closed mind.

Swallowing, I turned to face my husband. The love I was lucky enough to find. Well, it was more that he found me, but whatever.

He stood toe to toe with me and I had to tilt my head back to hold his gaze. He stroked my cheek, then traced my lips.

"How are you doing, *amorina*?"

I lifted a shoulder. "Not as bad as I should considering my mother was just buried."

"Like her stone reads, she's in a better place. I know it's not easy for you."

My eyebrows furrowed. "That's just it. I know it's better she's gone. I could have forgiven her for a lot, but hurting our baby..." A muscle tightened in his jaw and a glassy sheen covered his dark gaze. I knew he couldn't forgive her for hurting *me*, never mind our child. "It's just... well, it could have ended differently."

He nodded. "It could have, but ultimately, Alexandra chose wrong."

I wrapped my arms around his waist. “I know, but somehow she brought me to you, so I’ll be grateful to her for that.”

He bent his head, his lips meeting mine. “I think destiny always had plans when it came to you and me. It was just biding its time.”

He picked me up, then slowly made his way back to the waiting car while I skimmed my lips over his stubble-covered jaw. “But the wait was so worth it.”

He smiled. “It certainly was, Mrs. Marchetti.”

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EPILOGUE

MANUEL



One Year Later

I entered the foyer with Umbrio at my back, relieved to be back in my castello and eager to see my loved ones.

“You’re awfully happy to be back home,” he remarked dryly. “You rushed us so much that we had to travel around the world in twelve hours.”

“Damn straight.” He was just cranky because we didn’t stay behind in China after our meeting so he could sample some of its fruits. “I have a wife and a baby I missed like hell while playing diplomacy.”

He chuckled. “As if Qian would risk pissing off his sister, or Danil for that matter.”

I let out a sardonic breath. “That’s where you’re wrong. The man would risk everyone’s wrath for Nicki.”

The aria registered and I followed the tunes through the house, Umbrio tracking along and nagging. I tuned him out and focused on the beautiful voice that belonged to my wife who somehow managed to tear me apart with it and put me back together every single time.

Did it make me a wimp? Maybe. I didn’t give a flying fuck.

Another few steps and I found my wife and daughter among the vineyards and lemon trees.

I stopped abruptly, Umbrio almost running into me. Shooting him a glare, I made it clear if he let out a sound, I’d shoot him. He rolled his eyes

and made himself scarce while I returned my attention to the most beautiful welcome-home sight a man could wish for.

Wearing a simple yellow dress and standing barefoot, Athena held our daughter, swaying her hips and rocking her to sleep while singing soft opera tunes. Valentina, our beautiful baby girl, stared at her mamma with such an innocent and trusting expression that it hit me right in the chest.

These two were my entire world and I'd wage a thousand wars to protect them and keep them both happy. Just as I promised my young wife.

And I knew she was happy.

In the past year of our marriage, I learned that when Athena sang arias, she was at her happiest. When she was anxious, she hummed. When she was mad, she got silent. But when she was furious, which only happened if someone threatened our baby girl or me, she set the world on fire.

Athena's voice faltered and a smile spread over her face.

"My two favorite people in the whole wide world," was my greeting.

"Look, Valentina," she murmured as she rushed over to me, her bare feet silent against the grass. "Papà's home."

I met her halfway and wrapped my hand around her waist, bringing them both into my embrace. Pressing my mouth against hers, she opened up, letting me devour her. It didn't matter how many times I'd had her, I never tired of her. I was completely addicted to her and under her spell, but she was under mine too.

"I missed you," I rasped against her mouth.

"We missed you too." Athena lowered her gaze to our daughter, a soft smile playing around her lips. "Didn't we, Valentina?"

A soft coo sounded from our daughter and I bent my head, pressing a kiss on her little forehead.

"Papà missed you too, my little treasure."

Cazzo, this was happiness—a heaven on earth. All was right in the world when I was with them, in our paradise.

"How was the trip?" Athena inquired, knowing that anything to do with Qian and Atticus was bound to eventually go to shit. "Everything went well?"

I pressed my forehead against hers. "As you'd expect it to be. But everyone came out of it alive."

She smiled.

“That’s a bonus.” I brushed my fingers over our daughter’s thick dark hair as her eyes drooped. It was time for another nap. “Want to hold her for a bit, Papà?” I straightened, already reaching for her, and my wife chuckled. “You’re never that eager to hold me.”

“You’re wrong,” I told her, now holding my daughter with one hand and my wife with the other. “I’ll show you how much later, *amorina*.”

She tilted her face up to me. “I’m counting on it, husband.”

Yes, everything was so fucking right in the world.



I closed the nursery door as quietly as possible.

Putting Valentina to sleep was like strategizing a war. She was a handful compared to my nephews, turning our lives upside down, but I wouldn’t change any of it.

We took turns with her bedtime routine. Sometimes we even teamed up when Valentina got extra cranky, but my *amorina* and I got through them together.

The first few months were rough. We almost forgot what it meant to get a full night’s sleep, but it was getting easier each day.

But this was *our* family. The one I would protect with my life.

A set of dainty hands came around my waist and my wife’s fragrance wrapped around me.

“Are you ready to get freaky, husband?”

I turned around and found my wife standing in front of me... naked.

Cazzo.

She was the most beautiful woman I’d ever laid eyes on. It didn’t matter that I woke up next to her every day, she still took my breath away.

“I’m always ready for you, *amorina*.”

I scooped her up, heading toward our own bedroom, and shut the door behind me with my foot. Athena dug her hands into my shirt, giggling. Her cheeks were rosy and her eyes shimmered like emeralds. She looked so beautiful.

I loved seeing her playful and mischievous.

“How did I get so lucky?” I rasped, pressing my lips against hers. “I have the most beautiful wife and daughter in the world.”

“You knocked me up,” she teased. “Although, I think I got the better end of the deal. A handsome husband who inspires all my novels and who gave me the best gift of all with Valentina.” She skimmed her soft lips all over my face before kissing me deeply. “Now let me down,” she murmured against my mouth.

“Why?”

“Because I want you to fuck my mouth. And once upon a time, I promised you teabagging.”

I stifled my surprised laugh. Jesus, this woman turned me into a hungry beast, but her sex drive was as insatiable as mine.

I set her on her feet and she took my hand, flattening my palm on her beating heart.

Then she started to unbutton my shirt. Her throat worked around a swallow as she slid her hands down my abdomen until she reached my belt and undid it.

She lowered herself to her knees in front of me as her hands slid my pants and boxer briefs down.

A carnal lust for her hardened my dick and she smiled.

“Someone’s eager,” she purred.

She freed my cock, her hands wrapping around it, and her tongue darted out to lick the tip. My fingers dug into her dark hair as I groaned.

“You like this?”

“Cazzo, I do.” She stared up at me, still stroking me up and down. “Forget the teabagging and suck me.”

It was just like my wife not to obey, but I loved that about her too. Instead, she swirled her tongue around the crown, lapping at the droplets of pre-cum.

“Mmm. Are you going to fuck my mouth, husband?”

She opened her mouth, taking me to the back of her throat. The hum she made vibrated through me and almost made me burst right there and then. She knew exactly what to give me.

She relaxed and let me use her mouth, her breath hot around me.

Tears welled in her eyes, drool dripping down her chin, and the sight made my cock swell painfully.

I pulled out of her wet heat, and she took an audible breath.

“You like having your mouth fucked?”

Her answer was to open her lips and dart her tongue out.

Gripping her hair tighter, I pounded inside her mouth, my rhythm increasing.

She reached a hand between her thighs, touching herself.

“Are you wet for me?”

Her movements quickened between her thighs, the sound of her slick flesh and my thrusts mixing.

“Mmm.”

I pulled out of her with a groan.

Athena licked her lips. “Why did you stop?”

I lifted her up and threw her on the bed. She landed on her back with a delighted squeal, but before I could do anything, she flipped us over and straddled me.

Her hand stroked my hard cock and slowly guided me inside her opening.

Her head tipped back with a moan as she lowered herself until I was fully sheathed inside her swollen pussy. She bit her lower lip, lust and adoration shining in her eyes.

She arched her back and started moving slowly, lazily.

She felt like home. Fuck, she *was* home.

She rotated her hips, riding me just how I liked, the bliss etched on her beautiful features.

Her breasts bounced, and I reached a hand out and pinched them, making her moan.

My cock thickened inside her and she let out a breathy moan. Grabbing her by the hips, I started thrusting into her from below, driving into her fast and hard.

Her erotic sounds reverberated through the air, urging me on.

“Oh, Manuel... yes... yes...” she cried out as she fell apart around me, milking me. I followed her right over the edge, my own pleasure exploding at the same time.

She fell forward, sprawling over my chest, and I roamed my hands over her body.

“I love you,” I rasped, stroking her hair. “So fucking much.”

“I love you too, *marito*,” she sighed, running her fingers over my chest.

“Your pronunciation is getting better each day,” I praised.

She laughed softly. “I’ll have to keep up with my little hellion one day.”

I wrapped my arms around her. “I have a feeling Valentina is going to keep us both on our toes.”

We locked eyes, her love staring back at me. And I knew the future that awaited us would be blissful. I would spend the rest of my life showing her exactly how much she meant to me.

THE END

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WHAT'S NEXT?

*Thank you so much for reading **Thorns of Desire**! If you liked it, please leave a review. Your support means the world to me.*

If you're thirsty for more discussions with other readers of the series, you can join the Facebook group, Eva's Soulmates group (<https://bit.ly/3gHEe0e>).

Next up in the series is Giovanni Agosti's book, Thorns of Blood (<https://a.co/d/08CFMClx>).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Curious about Eva's other books? You can check them out here. Eva Winners's Books <https://bit.ly/3SMMSrN>

Eva Winners writes anything and everything romance, from enemies to lovers to books with all the feels. Her heroes are sometimes villains because they need love too. Right? Her books are sprinkled with a touch of suspense, mystery, a healthy dose of angst, a hint of violence and darkness, and lots of steamy passion.

When she's not working and writing, she spends her days either in Croatia or Maryland daydreaming about the next story.

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